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Title of Thesis — Titre de la thèse
The Grotesque in the Oresteia of Aeschylus

University — Université
University of Alberta

Degree for which thesis was presented — Grade pour lequel cette thèse fut présentée
Master of Arts

Year this degree conferred — Année d'obtention de ce grade 1981	Name of Supervisor — Nom du directeur de thèse Dr. Rosemary M. Nielsen

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THE UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

THE GROTESQUE IN THE *ORESTEIA* OF AESCHYLUS

by

Ⓒ SANDRA COLLEEN KRAM

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES AND RESEARCH

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

OF MASTER OF ARTS

IN

CLASSICS

DEPARTMENT OF CLASSICS

EDMONTON, ALBERTA

SPRING 1981

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Rosemary M. Nielsen
Supervisor

Robert J. Buck

Date March 20, 1981

Dedication

To my parents.

Abstract

The view of Aeschylus as a playwright who is bound to an unquestioning approval of traditional religious and political practices, although the conventional attitude of scholars, is nonetheless debatable. He was himself an active participant in the crucial military events that shaped his era, and he was an innovator in the genre of tragedy. Aeschylus was especially admired by the ancients as an expert in satyr-plays. In these the grotesque is a prominent literary device, one that allows the playwright to create distortions of both a physical and a thematic nature. For example, the beast choruses combine a sense of humanity with their animal form so that, despite their hideous physical shape, the skills they offer to men make them beneficial creatures. In the *Net Haulers*, a satyr-play that concluded a trilogy on the Perseus theme, Aeschylus treats in a crude and ludicrous manner characters who in the trilogy were the subject of serious comment. There is, therefore, no reason why the grotesque cannot be seen as playing an important role in the *Oresteia*. First, it allows Aeschylus to transform heroic figures of myth into human beings whose actions are complex and hence more realistic. Second, the grotesque, by playing upon the audience's emotional reaction to distortions of truth and beauty, serves to undercut any satisfaction with values that underlie the solution to homicide in the *Eumenides*.

This thesis examines the grotesque created by the distortions found in the sacrifice of Iphigenia, in the characterization of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, in the murder in the bath, and in the presentation of Orestes and the Furies. The grotesque in each of these characters or situations creates a turbulence in the viewer through the constant interplay of the ludicrous and the horrible. The horrible aspect of the grotesque will be shown to evoke a reaction of fear or terror, thereby stimulating feelings of tension or anxiety. These feelings are in turn alleviated by the introduction of the ludicrous in the figure or situation. But an examination of each of these characters or situations reveals that the ludicrous element, although it reduces the sense of menace, increases the feeling of dread by contrasting of contradictory emotions. The thesis attempts to show that Aeschylus uses the grotesque to present a clash of elements that are so incompatible through their distortions that there is no easy mechanism to resolve these discrepancies emotionally or intellectually.

The thesis concludes that only the killing of males is condemned. Traditional values are distorted in that both Agamemnon and Orestes are acquitted for a crime hitherto considered most heinous, that of kin-killing. The grotesque is the chief device used by Aeschylus to question the symbolic legal precedent that would support the supremacy of masculine rights.

Acknowledgement

I wish to thank Dr. Rosemary Nielsen for her aid, guidance and encouragement in the preparation of this thesis.

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Chapter One

The Life and Works of Aeschylus

Any facts about the life of Aeschylus cannot be confirmed or denied with any certainty; he does not seem to have been a popular subject for biographers. The account of his life which does exist, the "Vita Aeschyli"[1], which was appended to the Medicean manuscript of the plays, appears to be from a much later period, perhaps the tenth or eleventh century.[2] Biographers of this period tended to repeat uncritically stories and traditions which had grown up and attached themselves to a particular historical or literary figure. The "Vita" does, nevertheless, appear to contain some historical fact.

Aeschylus is generally agreed to have been born at Eleusis in 525/4 B.C. He was of the nobility, being the son of Euphorion, a member of the Eupatrid family. According to the "Vita" the epitaph on his grave at Gela in Sicily described Aeschylus as having fought at the battle of Marathon. The "Vita" also adds that he saw action in the sea-fight at Salamis. This latter fact is attested by his contemporary, Ion of Chios.[3] His participation in the battle of Platea as asserted by the "Vita" and in the battle off Artemisium mentioned by Pausanias[4] may be, as Podlecki suggests, an example of "the invariable attraction of great names for great events."[5]

According to Aristotle, Aeschylus was at one point accused of having revealed some aspect of the Eleusinian mysteries. He defended himself by saying that he had not been aware that the matter spoken of was secret.[6] From this it has been concluded that he may never have been initiated and had accidentally put something resembling the matter in question into one of his plays.[7] It is not known in which play this revelation is supposed to have taken place,[8] and modern scholars are unable to speculate upon this because of the small number of his plays and fragments extant.

Aeschylus made at least two trips to Sicily during his lifetime, although the "Vita" confuses the two by describing only one. The first trip must have occurred about 475 B.C. during which he wrote and produced the play Aetnae (The Women of Aetna) in honour of the new city of Aetna that his host, Hieron, had founded. His second journey to Sicily was also his last, for he died there during the archonship of Callias (456/5 B.C.). The "Vita" recounts the rather improbable story that he was killed by a tortoise which a passing eagle dropped on his head. At the age of sixty-nine he is more likely to have died from causes of a more natural sort.

Many theories have been advanced to account for the fact that Aeschylus never returned to Athens. According to one, he left after losing to Simonides the honour of composing an elegy for the dead at Marathon. Another states that he left Athens in anger at being defeated by Sophocles. Aristophanes in the Frogs (l. 807) says that Aeschylus did not get along with the Athenians. It is more likely that the reason for Aeschylus' departure was the attraction of Sicily itself. Under the patronage of the wealthy tyrants, Sicily had become a centre of artistic endeavour which attracted and encouraged artists in all fields, especially someone as dedicated to the advancement of his craft as Aeschylus. It is quite likely that he never returned to Athens because he died before he had the opportunity to do so.

There is no certainty about the exact number of plays Aeschylus wrote. The Suidas speaks of ninety plays; the "Vita" says that he composed seventy tragedies and five satyr plays. The Medicean manuscript contains a list of seventy-two plays. Nine additional titles can be derived from other sources. The "Vita" says that he won thirteen victories while the Suidas mentions twenty-eight. The latter figure probably includes posthumous victories. Only seven tragedies have survived; they are in a somewhat mutilated condition. There are many extant fragments of his plays, particularly some rather tantalizing portions of a satyr-play, Diktyoulkoi (The Net Haulers).

According to the Suidas Aeschylus first entered dramatic competition in the seventieth Olympiad (499-6 B.C.).[9] He won his first victory in 484 B.C.[10], but the plays that have survived come from a much later time in his career. The Persians is the earliest play dated at 472 B.C. The Seven Against Thebes is from 467 B.C., the Suppliants from about 464 B.C. The Oresteia trilogy, considered by many to be his greatest achievement, was produced in 458 B.C. The only play that cannot be fitted in with certainty is the Prometheus Bound, although it is thought to belong to the last fourteen years of his life.[11]

Notes

1. "Aischylou Bios." In Aeschylus. Tragoediae. Edited by Gilbert Murray. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 370-2.

2. Beck, Robert Holmes, Aeschylus: Playwright Educator. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1975, p. 7.

3. Scholiast on the Persians. 429, W 26.

4. Pausanias. I. 14.5, W 24.

5. Podlecki, Anthony J. The Political Background of Aeschylean Tragedy. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1966, p. 4.

6. Aristotle. Nichomachean Ethics. 3.1.

7. Rose, H.J. A Handbook of Greek Literature. London: Methuen, 1965, p. 148.

8. Scott, A.P.H. "Aeschylus, Astronomy and Sex." In A Speculative Study to Search the Genesis of the Architectural Form of Ancient Greek Theatre to Indicate a Possible Origin of Greek Drama in Calendar-Fixing. Diss. New York University, 1972, p. 4.

9. Suidas, W 50. In Tragoediae. Edited by Gilbert Murray. p. 373.

10. Parian Marble. In Tragoediae. Edited by Gilbert Murray. p. 373.

11. Herington, C.J. "Some Evidence for a Late Dating of the Prometheus Vinctus." CR 14 (1964), 239-40.

Chapter Two

Introduction

The Oresteia of Aeschylus, the only extant trilogy, has long been admired for the grandeur of its language, the richness of its imagery and the magnitude of its theme. In this appreciation little attention has been paid to the realism and to the contemporaneity of the issues woven into its mythological setting. Critics tend to view the characters as symbols playing out a metaphysical drama rather than as human beings subject to intense conflicts and passions. Indeed, Aeschylus may not have concentrated on realistic characterization in his plays at the expense of all other elements. Nevertheless, it is erroneous to ignore the details of the plays and to treat his characters as stick men and women acting blindly according to the requirements of plot.

New interpretation of the trilogy is hampered by the rigid way in which critics assess Aeschylus' outlook and philosophy. The common view is that he is quite traditional, in that his plays reflect an unqualified and unquestioning approval of contemporary Athenian social practices, religious beliefs and political institutions. The popularity of this idea arises because critics compare Aeschylus to the other tragedians rather than base their conclusions independently upon the text of his plays. It is true that, when placed next to the work of Euripides, Aeschylus' style and elevated language make him appear superficially the less innovative playwright. This conclusion, however, drawn as it is from a comparison, is a statement of relationship rather than of an absolute position.

Because of the scarcity of testimony about Aeschylus from other sources, scholars are overly influenced by Aristophanes' caricature of him in the Frogs. In the comedy Aeschylus vies with Euripides in a trumped-up competition for the title of supreme poet. The former has been chosen for this role, rather than Sophocles, because he belonged to what Ehrenberg calls "the war generation,"[1] the generation that had fought at Marathon. The deeds and personalities of these individuals were idealized by later generations. The first half of the fifth century took on the glow of "the good old days." Aeschylus' more solemn dramatic technique identified him, in the minds of the people, as the spokesman of their inherited customs and social viewpoint.[2]

This fixed idea of scholars about Aeschylus also influences their treatment of his plays. All their arguments attempt to dismiss or to explain away features that do not support the playwright's allegiance to old fashioned values. Lesky typifies this practice when he states that according to Aeschylus Zeus not only epitomized justice, but that he was also one with fate. The opinion is based upon Lesky's treatment of the conclusion of the Oresteia. But he is troubled by the inconsistency of this image of Zeus with that found in the Prometheus Bound. In the latter play Zeus is portrayed as a tyrant who inflicts upon Prometheus a punishment out of all proportion to the crime committed, and one which is in defiance of the Titan's past aid; in short, Zeus is the very antithesis of justice. Lesky finally resorts to the common practice of suggesting that perhaps the play does not belong to Aeschylus. This conjecture remains, however, one which he neither fully accepts nor satisfactorily rejects.[3] Rose has similar difficulty in that he sees Aeschylus as exhibiting the "old piety"[4] towards the gods by depicting a Zeus in the Oresteia who is "perfectly wise, beneficent and just."[5] The contradictory portrayal of Zeus in the Prometheus Bound is dismissed by Rose as a "riddle."[6]

The validity of the conventional view of Aeschylus as a traditional poet may also be questioned because of the turbulent and radical movements which shaped him and his plays. The major political change which took place during Aeschylus' life was the expulsion of the last of the tyrants, the Peisistratids, and the establishment of a democracy by Cleisthenes. A greater personal responsibility was thus placed upon the individual Athenian; Aeschylus' plays reflect this shift by their emphasis upon choice and its consequences. In the Suppliants King Pelasgus must choose between war with Egypt or the pollution of his country's altars. In the Seven Against Thebes Eteocles makes the choice to fight his brother Polynices, thereby fulfilling the curse of his father Oedipus. The destruction of a barbarian nation in the Persians is the consequence of Xerxes' blind and arrogant determination to conquer the Greeks. Agamemnon makes decisions which result in his own destruction: first, when he decides to sacrifice Iphigenia and, secondly, when he allows himself to be persuaded to walk on the red carpet. The action of the final two plays of the Oresteia also turns upon choice. Orestes decides to kill his mother; the Furies hand over the resolution of Orestes' guilt to Athene, who then ends the conflict by deciding in Orestes' favour. In the Prometheus Bound the god undergoes a public and excruciating torture because of his decision to withhold from Zeus the secret of the latter's possible overthrow as king. This repeated emphasis on choice and its consequences was doubtless meant to instruct a young Athenian democracy in the responsibility which rested upon its citizens every time they voted.

During this period, war became an important issue. First, there occurred the Athenian-supported Ionian revolt from 499-4 B.C. As well Athens had to overcome the threats to its democratic form of government which were posed by the oligarchies of Thebes, Aegina and Sparta. Finally, there was the ultimate test of Greek heroism, the war against Persia, in which Aeschylus himself played an active military role. The experience of war, its glories and its horrors, is seen in the Persians, which describes the victories of the Greeks and the cruel losses that overwhelmed the Persian people. Agamemnon takes a realistic look at the destructive and divisive nature of war by dwelling at length on the suffering experienced by both the winning and losing sides.

Such a responsiveness to personal and social crises shows not a playwright indissolubly bound to the traditions of the past, but rather one who is reflective and innovative. This is further illustrated by the important change Aeschylus made in the form of tragedy itself. He set the genre on a new course by making the spoken element more important than the song of the chorus by his introduction of the second actor.[7] In the same spirit he neither hesitated to examine the moral and political dilemmas of the time nor left the solutions applied to them unquestioned.

In the Oresteia Aeschylus makes use of the grotesque as an important dramatic device. The effect of the grotesque is to startle the viewer, draw him up short and force him to re-examine the nature of what he is perceiving. Its most extensive use as a technique is found in the Agamemnon wherein the basic moral issue of the trilogy is set out. In a lesser degree it is also present in the Choephoroi and the Eumenides. Its presence negates any feeling of complacency over the happy resolution of the moral and legal issues contained in the trilogy. Aeschylus' use of the grotesque suggests that he himself did not intend the resolution of the drama to be a fully satisfactory one.

The majority of scholars have regarded any resolution, no matter how superficial it may be, of the turmoil in the House of Atreus as a satisfactory conclusion to the trilogy.[8] A "happy" ending is therefore defined by them as one that diffuses the tensions and conflicts that have arisen during the dramatic action;[9] the resolution may be nothing more than an artificial restoration of a state of equilibrium.[10] Since the Oresteia is the only surviving trilogy and since it appears to conclude with some remediation of the family curse, critics have been reluctant to look behind the facade of this positive resolution. Gagarin, for example, sees the ending as one that illustrates a compromise involving the balance and harmony of opposing forces rather than the victory of one over the other.[11] Albin Lesky interprets the intervention of the gods and Athene's decree that parity of votes means acquittal as showing that only through the mercy of the gods can man free himself from "the bondage of crime and the destiny which encircles him."[12] To Smyth the ending represents the establishment of a final tranquil harmony "out of the collision of moral principles, out of the discordance of passion, human and divine."[13] Such a positive view of the trilogy's ending can only be argued by ignoring the emotionally disturbing and illogical details which are continually brought to the surface through the device of the grotesque.

Aeschylus' use of this device has gone largely unrecognized by scholars with the exception of Leo Aylen. In his article "The Vulgarity of Tragedy" Aylen discusses the mistaken view that Greek tragedy is a wholly solemn and dignified genre to the exclusion of its more sensational or "vulgar" aspects, of which the grotesque is a part.[14] In his discussion, however, he refers primarily to the Suppliants with only passing reference to the Oresteia. Cedric Whitman in his book Aristophanes and the Comic Hero has included an important discussion of the grotesque in classical literature, but he does not discuss its appearance in Greek tragedy to any great extent.[15]

The grotesque results form the unresolvable clash of elements which are basically incompatible.[16] These elements are horror, disgust or terror on the one hand and laughter or amusement on the other. A sensation of conflict and disharmony is created because these elements are placed in such a relationship that they work in constant opposition to each other. The horrible aspect of the grotesque evokes a reaction of fear or terror, thereby stimulating feelings of tension or anxiety. These feelings are in turn alleviated by the introduction of the ludicrous level in the figure or situation. The menace of the horrible aspect is thus reduced because the viewer can assume an amused detachment. The comic placed next to the horrible, through contrast, heightens the horrible level in the figure or situation. The viewer's sensation is thereby greatly increased. These two disparate elements are thus in constant interaction: it is the resulting conflict and discord which creates the viewer's characteristic reaction to the grotesque in a piece of work.

Much of the simultaneous reaction of fear and amusement created by the grotesque is the result of some form of distortion. This distortion is not so great that the original figure or situation becomes totally unrecognizable, but it is sufficient to create a drastic departure from what is normally experienced. Lee Byron Jennings refers to this process as a "recombining of the elements of experienced reality to form something alien to it; the norms of common life are replaced by an anti-norm... and the resulting creature takes on a life of its own."[17]

Grotesqueness is most closely attached to the human figure. The deformities and distortions which cause the greatest discomfort in the viewer are those in which the human appearance or personality is still recognizable, but its humanness has been drastically altered from what is "normal."[18] The process by which the human figure is made grotesque may also be applicable to entire scenes or situations, although the visual component may be somewhat reduced. Jennings observes:

> "A type of situation can be conceived of that displays a deep-seated distortion with aspects of the fearsome and ludicrous.... Here the distortion does not comprise a departure from the human form, but rather a violation of the basic norms of existence pertaining to our daily life."[19]

The grotesque in a character or situation creates a turbulence in the viewer through the constant interplay of the ludicrous and the horrible. It violates, as Jennings points out, the basic norms of existence such as personal identity, the stability of the unchanging environment, the inviolate nature of the human body and the separation of human and non-human realms.[20]

It is important that a distinction be made between the grotesque and the ironic. Both involve a discrepancy, but the ironic aims the recognition of that discrepancy at the intellect while the grotesque aims it at the emotions. Irony may involve a combination of the horrible and the humorous, but they are placed together in such a way that one may feel dread at the discrepancy being exposed, and yet at the same time be amused by the manner of its exposure. Irony gains its chief effect by the viewer's being able to work out intellectually a relationship between the disparate elements. The grotesque, on the other hand, presents a clash of elements so incompatible that a relationship cannot be worked out; its effect is primarily on the emotions.[21]

The grotesque as a literary form reaches far back into human history. This is supported by its prominence in the art and mythology of primitive peoples. From these beginnings it continued its existence into classical antiquity. For example, the figure of Thersites in the Iliad displays the characteristics of the grotesque. In an age which idealized the human body, his appearance as described by Homer, "bandy-legged, lame, stoop-shouldered,"[22] made him seem comically sub-human. But, as Cedric Whitman points out, when Thersites speaks he parallels the words of the god-like Achilles and thus he reflects "simultaneously animality and divinity."[23] His appearance makes him fit material for Odysseus to throttle in front of his peers; his advice, though good, is wholly ignored. Euripides too employs the grotesque in the Bacchae (1. 920ff.) when Pentheus sees Dionysus, who had previously appeared in human form, suddenly having the head of a bull.[24] Aristotle comes quite close to a description of the grotesque in the Poetics when, in his discussion of comedy, he speaks of characters who are of inferior moral bend with shortcomings which are ludicrous and ugly. He acknowledges the disarming effect of the ludicrous when he says that the "deformity" causes no pain.[25] The Romans too had grotesque figures. One of their processional figures, the child-eating ogre, Manducus, was regarded as being "ridicula et formidolosa," a figure of comic fun for adults, but an object of fright for children.[26]

Clearly the grotesque was not a form alien to the ancients, particularly the Greeks. Aeschylus uses it in the Oresteia in his portrayal of several important characters and events. The grotesque is found as a significant element in the sacrifice of Iphigenia, in the characterization of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, in the murder in the bath and in the presentation of Orestes and the Furies. The dramatic impact of the grotesque requires that the viewer re-examine the nature of what he is perceiving. This process further entails a re-evaluation of individuals and their motives, and of the important circumstances in which they are placed. An appreciation of the grotesque culminates in an awareness that the diversity of emotional and intellectual issues posed throughout the trilogy permits of no ready or easy solution. Indeed, the grotesque makes it impossible to accept Orestes' acquittal as anything more than a politically expedient means of disposing of a homicide involving kin-killing.

Notes

1. Ehrenberg, V. From Solon to Socrates. London: Methuen, 1973, p. 176.

2. Dover, K.J. Aristophanic Comedy. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1972, p. 188.

3. Lesky, Albin. Greek Tragedy. New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965, p. 88-9.

4. Rose, p. 160.

5. Ibid. p. 159.

6. Ibid.

7. Aristotle. Poetics. 1449 a 16. It is Aeschylus' addition of the second actor which has allowed greater interplay between the various characters and as a result a greater emphasis on psychological realism.

8. Rosenmeyer, Thomas G. The Masks of Tragedy. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1963, p. 41-2.
"Even with the fragmentary evidence available to us it is quite apparent that the proper ending of a trilogy is one in which conflicts are resolved and passion stories terminated. It does not matter whether the resolution is profound or superficial, whether it is achieved by reconciliation or adjudication or, as in our case (sc. Seven Against Thebes), sacrifice. Sometimes, as in the Oresteia, the ending is happy; sometimes it hinges on a death. The important thing is that by the end of the third play the tensions and conflicts which are set up and manipulated in the trilogy have ceased to operate."

9. Ibid.

10. Gagarin, Michael. Aeschylean Drama. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1976, p. 59.

11. Ibid. p. 118.

12. Lesky, p. 84.

13. Smyth, H.W. Aeschylean Tragedy. New York: Biblo and Tannen, 1969, p. 234.

14. Aylen, Leo. "The Vulgarity of Tragedy." In Classical Drama and its Influence. Edited by M.J. Anderson. London: Methuen, 1965, p. 87-100.

15. Whitman, Cedric H. Aristophanes and the Comic Hero. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1964, p. 42-58. Whitman confines his remarks on tragedy to a brief discussion of the grotesque in the Bacchae of Euripides. His primary interest in the grotesque is as a framework for Aristophanes' comic hero whom he sees as a being who exhibits a man-beast-god complex. He thus defines the grotesque as a mingling of forms. The importance of this definition will be clear in my treatment of Orestes and the Furies in Chapter Six.

16. Thomson, Philip. The Grotesque. London: Methuen, 1972, p. 2.

17. Jennings, Lee Byron. The Ludicrous Demon. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1963, p. 9-10.

18. Ibid. p. 4.

19. Ibid. p. 18.

20. Ibid. p. 18-19.

21. Thomson, p. 47-50.

22. Homer Iliad II 217-19.

23. Whitman p. 47-8.

24. Ibid. p. 45.

25. Aristotle Poetics. 1449 a 31.

Chapter Three

The Sacrifice of Iphigenia

καὶ τόθ' ἡγεμὼν ὁ πρέ-
σβυς νεῶν 'Αχαιικῶν, 185
μάντιν οὔτινα ψέγων,
ἐμπαίοις τύχαισι συμπνέων,
εὖτ' ἀπλοίᾳ κεναγγεῖ βαρύ-
νοντ' 'Αχαιικὸς λεώς,
Χαλκίδος πέραν ἔχων παλιρρό- 190
χθοις ἐν Αὐλίδος τόποις·

πνοαὶ δ' ἀπὸ Στρυμόνος μολοῦσαι
κακόσχολοι, νήστιδες, δύσορμοι,
βροτῶν ἄλαι,
ναῶν (τε) καὶ πεισμάτων ἀφειδεῖς, 195
παλιμμήκη χρόνον τιθεῖσαι
τρίβῳ κατέξαινον ἄνθος 'Αργεί-
ων· ἐπεὶ δὲ καὶ πικροῦ
χείματος ἄλλο μῆχαρ
βριθύτερον πρόμοισιν 200
μάντις ἔκλαγξεν
προφέρων Ἄρτεμιν, ὥστε χθόνα βάκτροις
ἐπικρούσαντας 'Ατρείδας
δάκρυ μὴ κατασχεῖν·

ἄναξ δ' ὁ πρέσβυς τόδ' εἶπε φωνῶν·
'βαρεῖα μὲν κὴρ τὸ μὴ πιθέσθαι, 206
βαρεῖα δ', εἰ
τέκνον δαΐξω, δόμων ἄγαλμα,
μιαίνων παρθενοσφάγοισιν
ῥείθροις πατρῴους χέρας πέλας βω- 210
μοῦ. τί τῶνδ' ἄνευ κακῶν;
πῶς λιπόναυς γένωμαι
ξυμμαχίας ἁμαρτών;
παυσανέμου γὰρ
θυσίας παρθενίου θ' αἵματος ὀργᾷ 215
περιόργως ἐπιθυμεῖν
θέμις. εὖ γὰρ εἴη.'

ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνάγκας ἔδυ λέπαδνον
φρενὸς πνέων δυσσεβῆ τροπαίαν
ἄναγνον, ἀνίερον, τόθεν 220
τὸ παντότολμον φρονεῖν μετέγνω.

βροτοῦς θρασύνει γὰρ αἰσχρόμητις
τάλαινα παρακοπὰ πρωτοπήμων.
ἔτλα δ' οὖν θυτὴρ γενέσθαι
θυγατρός, γυναικοποίνων
πολέμων ἀρωγὰν
καὶ προτέλεια ναῶν.

λιτὰς δὲ καὶ κληδόνας πατρῴους
παρ' οὐδὲν αἰῶ τε παρθένειον
ἔθεντο φιλόμαχοι βραβῆς.
φράσεν δ' ἀόζοις πατὴρ μετ' εὐχὰν
δίκαν χιμαίρας ὕπερθε βωμοῦ
πέπλοισι περιπετῆ παντὶ θυμῷ
προνωπῆ λαβεῖν ἀέρδην,
στόματός τε καλλιπρῴρου
φυλακᾷ κατασχεῖν
φθόγγον ἀραῖον οἴκοις.

βία χαλινῶν δ', ἀναύδῳ μένει,
κρόκου βαφὰς [δ'] ἐς πέδον χέουσα,
ἔβαλλ' ἕκαστον θυτή-
ρων ἀπ' ὄμματος βέλει φιλόικτῳ
πρέπουσα τὼς ἐν γραφαῖς, προσεννέπειν
θέλουσ', ἐπεὶ πολλάκις
πατρὸς κατ' ἀνδρῶνας εὐτραπέζους
ἔμελψεν, ἁγνᾷ δ' ἀταύρωτος αὐδᾷ πατρὸς
φίλου τριτόσπονδον εὔποτμον
παιῶνα φίλως ἐτίμα.

τὰ δ' ἔνθεν οὔτ' εἶδον οὔτ' ἐννέπω·
τέχναι δὲ Κάλχαντος οὐκ ἄκραντοι.
Δίκα δὲ τοῖς μὲν παθοῦ-
σιν μαθεῖν ἐπιρρέπει· τὸ μέλλον
ἐπεὶ γένοιτ' ἂν κλύοις· πρὸ χαιρέτω·
ἶσον δὲ τῷ προστένειν.
τορὸν γὰρ ἥξει σύνορθρον αὐγαῖς.
πέλοιτο δ' οὖν ἀ' πὶ τούτοισιν εὖ πρᾶξις, ὡς
θέλει τόδ' ἄγχιστον 'Απίας
γαίας μονόφρουρον ἕρκος.

-ἥκω σεβίζων σόν, Κλυταιμήστρα, κράτος·
δίκη γάρ ἐστι φωτὸς ἀρχηγοῦ τίειν
γυναῖκ' ἐρημωθέντος ἄρσενος θρόνου.

(A. 184-260)[1]

(And at that time, the elder leader of the
Achaean ships, reproaching the prophet not at all,
heaving to the sudden fortunes when the
Achaean people were being oppressed by a delay
in port, one which exhausts provisions, as they
held the land opposite Calchas in the regions of
Aulis that ebb and flow.

The blasts which come from the Strymon, those
blasts which wear men out in idleness, causing
hunger, detaining the fleet in harbour, causing
the wanderings of men, unsparing of ships and
cables, causing a double length of time,
by rubbing were tearing in pieces the flower of
the Argives. But when in fact the seer cried out
to the chiefs another thing as a remedy of the
bitter storm, a remedy heavier than the disease,
citing Artemis, the result was that the Atreidae
struck the ground with their staffs and could
not restrain a tear.

The elder king raising up his voice said this:
"It would be a heavy ruin for me not to obey,
but heavy it will be if I hew in pieces
my child, the delight of the house, defiling
these father's hands with streams of a
slaughtered maiden's blood near the altar.
What of these things is there that is without
evil? How am I to desert the fleet and
fail my allies? For it is meet to desire
with impulsive passion the sacrifice
that stills the wind, a maiden's blood.
May it be well."

But when he put on the halter of necessity,
breathing out a change of his mind, one impious,
impure, unholy, from that time he changed
his mind to think the all-daring thing. For
forming base designs emboldens men, that
miserable infatuation, the first cause
of suffering. Therefore he had the heart to
become the sacrificer of his daughter, the
aid of the woman-avenging war, the preliminary
rites of sacrifice on behalf of the ships.

The chiefs lusting for battle set at nothing
her entreaties and appeals to her father, set
at nothing the life of the maiden. And after

the prayer, the father said to the servants to take her with all zeal in the manner of a she-goat wrapped around with her robes, with her head inclined, lifting her up over the altar, with a guard on her beautiful mouth to restrain a cry that brings a curse on the house.

Because of the force of the curbs and the strength preventing speech, pouring out onto the plain her robes dyed with saffron, she struck each of the sacrificers with a piteous dart from her eye, conspicuous as in paintings, wishing to address him, for often in the hospitable banqueting halls of her father she would sing and she, unwedded, would lovingly honour in her pure voice her dear father's prosperous paean of praise that accompanied the third libation.

But those events thereafter I did not see and I cannot describe. The skills of Calchas were not in vain. Justice leans towards those who suffer in order to learn. With respect to the future, when it comes about, you will hear. Dismiss it for now; it is equal to lamenting in advance. For it will come piercing, dawning with its beams. And may there be then, an issue which is favourable with respect to these affairs, just as she wishes - this nearest single-guardian defence of the Apian land.

I come reverencing your rule, Clytemnestra; for it is right to pay honour to the wife of the chief man when the throne has been left empty of a male.)

The sacrifice of Iphigenia by the Greeks at Aulis is the most significant event of the Oresteia. The decision made by Agamemnon to offer his daughter in order to get the expedition to Troy is the action by which every subsequent choice in the trilogy must be judged.[2] Hence, although the sacrifice proper is an action outside the plot of the Agamemnon, the prominent position given to this perverted ritual and the detailed and almost visionary manner in which it is presented indicates the importance it will have as an underlying factor in the judgement of what follows. Iphigenia's death is the controlling motif of the parados and first stasimon (A. 40-263). This section is itself unique in its lack of episode to separate the choral passages. The silent presence of Clytemnestra on stage adds a further disturbing quality.[3] The choral lyric functions, almost inadvertently, as a mirror of Clytemnestra's antagonism as wife and mother. The chorus of Argive elders, who claim partisanship to Agamemnon's cause, nonetheless are unable to suppress their horror at Agamemnon's deed. They repeatedly interrupt their song of joy over the seeming triumph of Justice with visions of a maiden's death brought about to appease Artemis, a death which made the military success possible. Aeschylus increases the dramatic impact of this re-enactment of kin-killing by having the chorus suddenly disclaim any knowledge at the very moment which would have recorded the actual death blow. "But those events thereafter I did not see and I cannot describe," the chorus concludes with obvious discomfort. Then they swiftly take refuge in abstractions about justice and the future (A. 248-57). Such an abrupt change at this crucial point in the narration of the sacrifice increases the audience's awareness of the complexity of issues in the Agamemnon. In this reversal Aeschylus achieves a more intense dramatic effect by what is left unsaid than by what is said. The audience is placed in a curious and disturbing vacuum. Each person must complete with his own imagination the climax of the sacrifice which the chorus has found literally unspeakable.

It is significant that Aeschylus has chosen to portray the sacrifice of Iphigenia as an essentially grotesque action on three separate levels: the human, the religious and the divine. On each level the horrible element of the grotesque arises out of the violence and brutality of a young girl being killed and cut into pieces. The ludicrous element on the three separate levels issues from the inappropriateness of those who should be opposing this killing being the ones who direct and consent to it.

On the human level, the sacrifice represents the destruction of the special bond of trust and affection which exists between father and daughter. The existence and importance of this bond is well established by Homer. The Iliad, for example, begins with a Trojan father, the priest Chryses, coming to the camp of the Greeks to ask for the return of his daughter (Il. I. 43-52). The honouring of his petition sets in motion the quarrel with which the epic is concerned. The beginning of the Odyssey demonstrates that such a father-daughter bond can exist on the divine level as well. There is a mutual regard and affection visible in the exchange between Zeus and his daughter Athene as she pleads for the release of Odysseus who has been detained for seven years by the nymph Kalypso on the island of Ogygia (Od. I. 44-95). Zeus' acquiescence to Athene's special pleading sets in motion a series of events which culminate in the homecoming of Odysseus. The relationship between Agamemnon and Iphigenia is similarly shown by Aeschylus to have been one of tenderness and intimacy. She was so favoured by her father that she frequently was invited (note the imperfect tense, 1.244-247) to sing in honour of the pouring of the third libation before the masculine company in the banquet hall (A. 244-47). The presence of a female at a traditionally male symposium shows her treasured position in Agamemnon's life. The fact of such a relationship causes her entreaties and appeals to her father at the time of the sacrifice at Aulis to appear more pitiful (A. 229). In addition, their intimacy makes Agamemnon's direction of the sacrifice unnerving to the audience. A loving father should be steadfast in the protection of his child, rather than the chief agent of her destruction.

Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter also represents an aberration in the normal parent-child relationship. In nature the parent nourishes and protects its offspring even at the cost of its own

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safety and wellbeing. Agamemnon by his deed has reversed and distorted this natural order. This is made evident through an examination of the details of the sacrificial ritual which the chorus has left out (A. 248). Such details would be well known to Aeschylus' audience since the ritual pattern had been well established by Homer's time, and had continued with only minor variations.[4] The ritual began with the lustration of the hands, a scattering of barley grains and a prayer. Then an official cut some hair from the victim and threw this hair into the fire. Following this the victim's neck was drawn up and cut. The victim was flayed and its thigh pieces wrapped in fat and burned over the altar. It was believed that the gods particularly enjoyed this fragrance. Those organs below the diaphram, such as the kidneys and liver, were roasted and eaten. The flesh of the victim was then cooked and eaten at a banquet, which would be accompanied by libations, music and dancing.[5] Customary activities surrounding the sacrifice of an animal are palatable to an audience steeped in religious ritual.[6] But Agamemnon's substitution of a human being in place of an animal and his refusal to revere the ties of kin are proof to the audience of his perversity. Furthermore, the chorus' silence about the actual slaughter shows their revulsion at the idea of a father tasting the flesh of his own child. In addition, the libations, music and dancing, with which the ritual would have concluded, provide a grim reminiscence of Iphigenia's privileged participation at his banquets. In this way the natural order is reversed as Agamemnon, who should normally foster and defend his child, is instead nourished by her flesh and reaffirmed in his leadership by her death.[7]

The ludicrous element in the religious level arises out of the misuse of ritual entailed in such a sacrifice. Iphigenia had been summoned to Aulis on the pretext of marriage to Achilles. Although this fact is not stated directly in the trilogy, the use of language connected with marriage calls it to mind. The robes which Iphigenia wore at the sacrifice are κρόκου "dyed with saffron" (A. 239), a colour more appropriate to the joyous occasion[8] for which she had come. Her garment is a poignant reminder of how far removed her expectations were from the situation in which she found herself. The word προτέλεια is also connected with the ceremony of marriage. It usually refers to the preliminary sacrifices made by a young woman to Artemis on the occasion of her wedding. The word, which is associated with the consumation of a joyous event, takes on a sinister overtone early in the play when it depicts the sufferings experienced by the men on the battlefield at Troy - διακναιομένης τ' ἐν προτελείοις καμάκος "and the spear shaft worn away in the preliminary struggles." (A. 65-66). The slaughter of Greek and Trojan alike is presented as an initial ritual offering to Zeus in payment for the conquest of Troy. The link between the deaths at Troy and the one death that is necessary for a Greek victory at Troy is made clear when the sacrifice of Iphigenia is called προτέλεια ναῶν "the preliminary sacrifice of the ships" (A. 227). Lebeck points out that by similarity of sound this phrase evokes the full title of the wedding ritual, προτέλεια γάμων.[9]

Having come to Aulis to offer her wedding προτέλεια to Artemis, Iphigenia herself becomes the προτέλεια offered by Lord Agamemnon to that same goddess. Thus the ceremony of marriage, which ought to be beneficial and a reaffirmation of Iphigenia's feminine role, is twisted and distorted by a father's contempt of ritual. For Iphigenia marriage is simply a ruse to lead her to her own death.

The text of the play leaves no doubt as to the character of the sacrifice. The chorus refers to it as ἄνομόν "lawless," ἄδαιτον "that which may not be eaten," νεικέων τέκτονα σύμφυτον "the inborn author of quarrels," (A. 151-2). Agamemnon loses all sense of Greek propriety; his inability to discern between the pretext and the price of his decision to slaughter Iphigenia is censured by terms such as δυσσεβῆ "impious," ἄναγνον "impure" and ἀνίερον "unholy" (A. 219-20).

Those whose role it ought to be to guard traditional rites, the king and the seer as well as the elders, are the ones who in this event effect their profanation. Both king and seer take active roles in violating ritual patterns; the chorus of Argive elders, despite all of their pious protestations of disgust, are passive and complacent. Clytemnestra herself condemns the elders' failure and complicity in the abuse of ritual. Following the murder of Agamemnon the queen demands to know why the chorus did not in the past urge the banishment of their king because of the pollution brought about by his murder of Iphigenia (A. 1412-20).

The grotesque effect on the divine level is brought about by the fact that it is Artemis who demands the sacrifice. Traditionally, Artemis protected and cared for animal young and growing human children.[10] The chorus invokes this tradition when they describe Artemis as "so very well-disposed to the tender dew-drops (the young) of devouring lions and of all wild beasts, delightful to the animal young who love the breast of all the wild creatures..." (A. 140-3). The reference to the devouring lion and its young reminds us of Agamemnon and his child Iphigenia. Her youth and innocence (A. 245-6) certainly make her a fitting object for Artemis' patronage. She is the goddess to whom young girls made sacrifice at their wedding. Iphigenia, as a prospective bride, would have even more reason to expect the goddess' help. Instead, Artemis is seen betraying the defense of one who is young, female and innocent in order to retaliate against the "winged hounds" whom her father Zeus sent against Troy.

On each of the three levels there is an opposition between what individuals are expected to do and what they actually do. Such an opposition could normally be viewed as ironic. In the case of the sacrifice, however, behavior is grotesque because on each level there has been a fundamental violation of acceptable standards of conduct. The relationships between parent and child, between religion and its upholders and between goddess and those under her protection are so fundamental that the discrepancy in each relationship created by the sacrifice cannot be resolved intellectually. Thus the sacrifice falls into the realm of the grotesque.

The lyric re-enactment of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, one which is grotesque in all of its actual or imagined details, serves a number of important purposes. First, the sacrifice defines the nature of the crime for which Agamemnon must make payment. His abuse of ritual is but one in a cyclical chain of impious religious actions. It is the common thread that binds together all the members of Atreus' household, past, present and future; each uses ritual to achieve profane objectives. Secondly, it prepares for the grotesque distortion in role and function found in many of the characters and events in the trilogy. This is particularly so in the personalities of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra. Finally, Artemis' demand of the sacrifice foreshadows the later intervention of the gods in the Choephoroi and in the Eumenides. Artemis abandons Iphigenia in order to serve her own cause in a power struggle between her father's loyalty to the Greeks and her own favouring of the Trojans. The goddess' act is arbitrary, revealing a political rather than a religious motivation. In a similarly arbitrary fashion, Athene decides in favour of Orestes' acquittal in the Eumenides because the facts of her own parentage make the goddess more attuned to a male's cause.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise indicated, the text throughout is G. Murray's Aeschylus, *Tragoediae* (Oxford, 1960).
   The translations are my own.

2. Peradotto, J.J. "The Omen of the Eagles and the ἦθος of Agamemnon." *Phoenix* 23 (1969) 237-63.
   Peradotto contends in his article that Artemis does not compel Agamemnon to sacrifice his daughter. She merely creates a situation in which he may either refuse the sacrifice and cancel the expedition or else pursue the war by beginning the slaughter with his own child (p. 250). Similarly, there is no suggestion from antiquity that the failure to punish a crime against hospitality was itself an affront to the gods (p. 251). He concludes, therefore, that Agamemnon was under no divine compulsion to sacrifice his daughter, but that he did so strictly because of his ἦθος, his abiding disposition or habitual texture of mind and behavior (p. 255-6).

3. There has been a good deal of controversy as to the exact point at which Clytemnestra makes her entrance on stage. See Fraenkel, Vol. 2, p. 51-52 and Oliver Toplin's article "Aeschylean Silences and Silences in Aeschylus." *HSPh*. (1972), 57-97, for discussions of the various views of this problem. My own view is that she is present on stage from the beginning of the play. Line 87 tells us that she is engaged in sacrificial ritual. This action harkens back to the sacrifice of Iphigenia and foreshadows the murder of Agamemnon, which Clytemnestra will view in terms of sacrificial ritual. It is fitting, therefore, that such an ominous activity should be accompanied by so prolonged a silence. Her silent presence doubles the dramatic effect of the chorus' retelling of the sacrifice at Aulis.

4. Yerkes, Royden K. *Sacrifice in Greek and Roman Religion and Early Judaism*. London: Adam and Charles Black, 1953, p. 98.

5. Ibid.

6. A χίμαιρα or she-goat was normally sacrificed to Artemis Agrotera before battle. There is, therefore, nothing notable in the fact that Agamemnon sacrifices a female child rather than a male child. See Fraenkel, p. 333.

7. In making his decision to sacrifice his child, Agamemnon follows in the family tradition of father eating child. In Agamemnon's case, the horror is more pointed because Thyestes was tricked

by Atreus and ate his offspring unknowingly. Agamemnon is fully conscious of what he is doing.

8. Aristophanes. Lys. 219, Thes. 138, 253, 945.

9. Lebeck, Anne. The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 70.

10. Nilsson, Martin P. A History of Greek Religion. Oxford: London, 1967, p. 28.

Chapter Four

Agamemnon

The figure of Agamemnon, which Aeschylus portrays as grotesque, has been subject to a broad range of interpretations. These variations are interesting, because the way that a commentator judges Agamemnon determines his view not only of Clytemnestra but also of the outcome of the trilogy.

Michael Gagarin sees much of the trilogy in terms of sexual conflict. All of Agamemnon's actions are consistent with the male point of view. The theft of Helen is a violation of the male institution of "xenia" ("guest-friendship") and, by sacrificing his daughter, Agamemnon puts "a male and militaristic set of values"[1] before any feelings his wife might possess on hearing that her daughter's life has been taken for such a purpose. By ignoring Clytemnestra and her rights as the mother of their child, Agamemnon commits a crime against marriage, from the woman's point of view, to reaffirm marriage from the man's point of view.[2] He is presented in the play, according to Gagarin, primarily as a military commander. This is emphasized not only by his choice of war before his daughter, but also by the herald's praise of Agamemnon's leadership (A. 524-37), by the importance he places on the destruction of Troy, and by the many references made to his military strength.[3]

Beck views Agamemnon not as a man whose behavior requires some psychological interpretation, but rather as a character acting out a role in a morality play.[4] Dawe concludes that Agamemnon is a pawn in the hands of the author, a character whose actions have no psychological motivation, but one whose behavior is dictated solely by the demands of plot.[5] Eduard Fraenkel has a somewhat sympathetic attitude toward Agamemnon, seeing him as "a great gentleman, possessed of moderation and self-control... ."[6] Denniston-Page takes an opposite view, describing Agamemnon as an unsympathetic figure, cold and hostile to those around him, rude to his wife and full of empty phrases of piety for the gods.[7]

All of these views leave unaccounted the most important fact which must be taken into consideration when examining the figure of Agamemnon in the trilogy: the Agamemnon who appears onstage does not match very well with the expectations of him set forth by the watchman, the chorus and the messenger. When he appears on stage, Agamemnon is a distorted figure. This distortion is not of a physical nature, but rather it concerns how the Greeks would perceive him as a victorious king, as a Greek and as a warrior, in comparison with their experienced reality of these things. The only character who clearly recognizes the grotesqueness of what the man has become is Clytemnestra. She interprets him accurately both in her words of address and in her dialogue with Agamemnon and in the public display of himself that she forces upon him by seducing him to walk on the carpet.

Any claims to being a victorious king that Agamemnon might make are undercut by the presence in the first play of three grotesque images that contradict the conventional concept of what victory means. Each of the three images does this by interweaving elements which are totally incongruous and disparate.

The first image describes the loss suffered by the Greeks who sent their sons off to war only to see them return in the ancient equivalent of body-bags, urns of ashes:

τὸ πᾶν δ' απ' αῖας Ἕλλαδος συνορμένοις
  πένθεια τλησικάρδιος
  δόμῳ 'ν ἑκάστου πρέπει.
πολλὰ γοῦν θιγγάνει πρὸς ἧπαρ·
  οὓς μὲν γὰρ (τις) ἔπεμψεν
  οἶδεν, ἀντὶ δὲ φωτῶν
τεύχη καὶ σποδὸς εἰς ἑκά-
  στου δόμους ἀφικνεῖται.

ὁ χρυσαμοιβὸς δ' Ἄρης σωμάτων
καὶ ταλαντοῦχος ἐν μάχῃ δορὸς
  πυρωθὲν ἐξ Ιλίου
  φίλοισι πέμπει βαρῦ
  ψῆγμα δυσδάκρυτον, ἀντ-
  ήνορος σποδοῦ γεμί-
  ζων λέβητας εὐθέτους.

(A. 429-444)

(In general a much enduring sorrow for those who set forth together from the land of Greece is conspicuous in the house of each one. Many things at any rate touch the heart; for those whom one sent forth one knew, and in return for human beings, urns and ashes arrive at the houses of each.

Ares, the one who changes the bodies of men for gold and who holds the balance in the battle of spears, sends from the fire out of Ilion to their loved ones the heavy ash, sorely wept, freighting the conveniently-packed urns of dust instead of men.)

In this image, the grotesque arises out of the manner in which something that is painful and serious, the death of sons and the return home of their remains, is presented. To describe the event, Aeschylus has chosen a metaphor borrowed from a familiar activity of everyday life.[8] Ares is cast in the role of money-changer, but rather than dealing in bulk metal, he deals in human bodies which he weighs on the scale of battle, using it like a merchant's balance. Then by passing them through the fire (πυρωθὲν, A. 439), in this case that of a funeral pyre, he changes them not to gold dust, but to the "conveniently-packed" (εὐθέτους, A. 444) ashes of human beings.[9] The grief-stricken parent, in return for the investment of his living son receives back an urn packed with ash, a mixture of the remains of many bodies. Verrall, commenting on the word εὐθέτους, notes: "It is an epithet borrowed from the merchant's gold dust, whose convenience of small bulk, ready exchange etc., is a chief part of its value. To the ashes it is applicable only in bitter irony, because, as compared with the living man, they are so small in bulk and so quickly disposed of."[10] Here the source of the grotesque is the inappropriateness of the commercial metaphor to the matter of life and death. The discrepancy between substance and the manner of its presentation in its grotesqueness serves to emphasize the horrible reality of the loss suffered by Agamemnon's subjects and thereby to undermine his claims to a genuine victory.

A few lines later a second image brings into focus what was really gained by this war pursued by Agamemnon. Those Greeks who fell in battle around the walls of Troy, being on the "winning" side, do occupy the foreign land they conquered (A. 452-5). The painful reality, however, is that they occupy only as much soil as is needed for their graves. The play on the word ἔχοντας (A. 455), which means both "holding by conquest" and "physically occupying," reveals the grotesqueness of the situation and calls into question the reality of Agamemnon's triumph.

The final image that detracts from the impression of Agamemnon's success in battle and from his prowess as a leader of men occurs when the messenger describes the effects of the Thracian blasts that wrecked the home-coming Greek fleet:

> ἐπεὶ δ' ἀνῆλθε λαμπρὸν ἡλίου φάος,
> ὁρῶμεν ἀνθοῦν πέλαγος Αἰγαῖον νεκροῖς
> ἀνδρῶν Ἀχαιῶν ναυτικοῖς τ' ἐρειπίοις.
> (A. 658-60)
>
> (And when the beaming light of the sun came up, we see
> the Aegean sea blossom with the corpses of Achaean men and
> with the carcasses of ships.)

The metaphor is one of a crop nurtured by an evening's rain and blooming in the morning sunlight. This imagery is, however, totally incompatible with the reality it describes. An array of flowers suggests fecundity and the beginning of new life; the context in which the image is presented is dominated by death and incipient decay, as seen in the word νεκροῖς (A. 559) "corpses." The dead lie festering upon the water's surface, a hideous display. The scene envisioned conflicts with the manner of its description so that the audience experiences a sensation which is at once horrible and ludicrous.

The evidence presented by these three grotesque images contradicts the picture of Agamemnon as a proud victor. For Agamemnon to claim to be the "winner" in view of the suffering and losses inflicted upon his people means that the audience must redefine their concept of victory so that it embodies and justifies the abusive and distorted behavior of Agamemnon as a leader of men.

Clytemnestra salutes her husband in ways that call attention to the true nature of his victory:

> νῦν ταῦτα πάντα τλᾶσ', ἀπενθήτῳ φρενὶ
> λέγοιμ' ἄν ἄνδρα τόνδε τῶν σταθμῶν κύνα,
> σωτῆρα ναὸς πρότονον, ὑψηλῆς στέγης
> στῦλον ποδήρη, μονογενὲς τέκνον πατρί,
> καὶ γῆν φανεῖσαν ναυτίλοις παρ' ελπίδα,
> κάλλιστον ἦμαρ εἰσιδεῖν ἐκ χείματος
> ὁδοιπόρῳ διψῶντι πηγαῖον ῥέος.
>
> (A. 895-901)
>
> (But now having suffered all these things, with a mind free from grief, I could call this man the watchdog of the stables, saving forestay of the ship, foot-fixed pillar of the lofty roof, single child of the father, land appearing to sailors contrary to hope, the day fairest to look upon after a storm, spring water to a thirsting traveller.)

Her address is ludicrous in its exaggeration and in its complete reversal of the true situation. Agamemnon has come home with virtually nothing of the fleet that went to Troy. It is this context which shows the real objective of Clytemnestra's praise. Each image that connotes security and hope is strangely out of place in view of the destructive effect that Agamemnon's conquest of Troy has had upon his family, his citizens and his allies. As a vigilant watchdog he had been miserably ineffective; a "womanish" man, Aegisthus enjoys the bed of Agamemnon's queen. Nor is he like a forestay or a foot-fixed pillar, for he has been easily toppled by a mere woman, Clytemnestra. It is she who is in full control of the city. This is made clear from the outset by the Watchman in the Prologue when he speaks of "the hopeful heart of a woman of manly counsel" wielding power (A. 10-11). Moreover, the silence of the chorus while Clytemnestra has plotted how best to receive her returning lord reveals how little anyone looks to Agamemnon as the mainstay of the house. The comparison of Agamemnon to land appearing to sailors harkens back to the earlier admission by the messenger that many in the expedition drowned at sea on their way home (A. 655ff.). Agamemnon has clearly failed to protect his sailors. In likening Agamemnon to the vision of land sighted by sailors "contrary to hope" (παρ' ἐλπίδα, A. 899), Clytemnestra plays upon a second and more suitable meaning of the phrase, as land "beyond hope", which indeed it is for the drowned sailors of Agamemnon. As the cause of so many deaths, Agamemnon could be more appropriately viewed as the storm itself rather than as the dawn of a fair day after a tempest. The only comparison that is apt is that of the refreshing vision that spring water brings to the weary traveller. But there is a level of ugliness even in this image since the only thirst that Agamemnon will slake is that of Clytemnestra for revenge. Her reference to the vision of Agamemnon as pleasurable as the sight of a single child to a father reminds the audience of Agamemnon's sacrifice of his daughter, and, therefore, of the price paid by his own family for this military "victory."

A second aspect of grotesqueness is found in the distortion in Agamemnon's behavior and outlook as it would be perceived by the Greeks of Aeschylus' time. As one who should represent the epitome of Greek kingship, Agamemnon acts in a manner more befitting the oriental monarchs whom he has conquered. This is underscored by the discrepancy between the messenger's description of Agamemnon in battle and the king's actions once onstage. In his speech the messenger sets out a standard of conduct for one who is a Greek king:

> ἀλλ' εὖ νιν ἀσπάσασθε, καὶ γὰρ οὖν πρέπει,
> Τροίαν κατασκάψαντα τοῦ δικηφόρου
> Διὸς μακέλλῃ, τῇ κατείργασται πέδον.
> βωμοὶ δ' αἴστοι καὶ θεῶν ἱδρύματα,
>
> (A. 524-7)
>
> (But greet him well as is his due, the man who overthrew Troy utterly with the pick-axe of justice-bringing Zeus, with which the plain was thoroughly worked. The altars are invisible as well as the temples of the gods,)

Agamemnon is depicted at first as an unpretentious workman-king, carrying out a task as the pious and obedient servant of Zeus. But the image of Agamemnon's righteous conduct is immediately weakened when the messenger tells of the atrocious act whereby the Greeks razed sacred places.[11] This is the first hint that Agamemnon's behavior has become uncharacteristic of Greek practice.

Agamemnon himself reveals his new ways in the very first words he speaks in the play. His speech is Greek in its rhetorical and quasi-judicial tone, but foreign in its patronizing treatment of the gods.

> πρῶτον μὲν Ἄργος καὶ θεοὺς ἐγχωρίους
> δίκη προσειπεῖν, τοὺς ἐμοὶ μεταιτίους
> νόστου δικαίων' θ' ὧν ἐπραξάμην πόλιν
> Πριάμου'...
>
> (A. 810-13)
>
> (First it is right to address Argos and the gods of the land, those accessories with me of my homecoming and of the penalties which I exacted upon the city of Priam.)

By his use of the word μεταιτίους ("accessories") Agamemnon has referred to the gods as though they were subordinate contributors to his undertaking rather than those who made victory possible. He thus denies a fundamental Greek attitude towards the gods by placing himself on a level above the divine in this matter. He appears to the audience as a figure more in keeping with their notion of a barbarian "god-king." Most commentators recognize the arrogance and inappropriateness of Agamemnon's greeting. Rose interprets Agamemnon as prey to hubris because "he graciously allows that the gods deserve some credit for his success...", but the only active role they are acknowledged to have had is "to vote the Trojans guilty after Agamemnon and his host had finished their 'pleadings.'"[12] Denniston-Page regards his behavior as unparalleled for, although there are many passages in which mortals ask the gods to act as allies in their undertakings, there is none in which the help of the gods has been given such a secondary place.[13] Verrall sees the passage as exhibiting a strange form of religious gratitude.[14] Only Fraenkel finds nothing incorrect or unusual about Agamemnon's reference to the gods as μεταιτίους.[15]

The alien quality of Agamemnon's words is especially clear if his address is contrasted with the statement of Greek piety contained in the messenger's earlier speech:

> τοιαῦτα χρῆ κλύοντας εὐλογεῖν πόλιν
> καὶ τοῦς στρατηγούς· καὶ χάρις τιμήσεται
> Διὸς τάδ' ἐκπράξασα.
>
> (A. 580-2)
>
> (It is necessary for those hearing such things as these to speak favourably of the city and of the generals; and the favour of Zeus which accomplished these things will be honoured.)

Although the messenger acknowledges the skill and courage of the mortals involved in this venture, he recognizes the favour of Zeus as the true "accomplisher." The contrast between the attitudes of Agamemnon and the messenger is made plain by their use of the verb πράττειν "accomplish." The messenger uses it in its participial form to describe the gracious action of Zeus; Agamemnon employs the first person singular (ἐπραξάμην, A. 812, "I accomplished"), which leaves no doubt that, in his own mind, he himself had more to do with the glorious outcome of the military expedition than did the gods. Indeed, Agamemnon appears to salute the gods more because it is δίκη "right," the conventional thing to do rather than out of any deep religious conviction. This differing use of the same verb brings out the contrast between the two men. It shows how far from the normal Greek outlook Agamemnon has strayed.

As the scene continues to unfold, the distortion in Agamemnon becomes more fully expressed until, at the end of the scene, he determines to walk on the carpet, an act which is undeniably not Greek. Just as Agamemnon complied with Artemis' demand for a sacrifice in payment for the taking of Troy, so too he yields to Clytemnestra's demand that he publicly give witness to his military success in a way that likens him to a foreign king, Priam. At first, Agamemnon resists her invitation to tread upon the lavish purple carpet, but her skillful verbal fencing and flattery overwhelm his show of reluctance. It is almost as though the chorus and audience are witness to the demise of Agamemnon's last scruples as a Greek king. The rapidity with which he gives way to a woman on such a serious issue suggests that Denniston-Page is correct in stating that Agamemnon believes that this honour is his due.[16]

Agamemnon proves that he knows full well how a Greek ought to react to extravagant praise, particularly that of a female (A. 895-901). In response to Clytemnestra's suggestion that he not set his foot upon the ground, but rather walk upon the red carpet into the house, he proclaims:

> καὶ τἄλλα μὴ γυναικὸς ἐν τρόποις ἐμὲ
> ἄβρυνε, μηδὲ βαρβάρου φωτὸς δίκην
> χαμαιπετὲς βόαμα προσχάνῃς ἐμοί,
> μηδ' εἵμασι στώσασ' ἐπίφθονον πόρον
> τίθει· θεούς τοι τοῖσδε τιμαλφεῖν χρεών·
> ἐν ποικίλοις δὲ θνητὸν ὄντα κάλλεσιν
> βαίνειν ἐμοὶ μὲν οὐδαμῶς ἄνευ φόβου.
> λέγω κατ' ἄνδρα, μὴ θεόν, σέβειν[17] ἐμέ. (A. 918-925)
>
> (Also in other things do not coddle me just like a woman,
> nor in the manner of a barbarian man cry out a shriek
> while falling on the ground to me, nor by having spread out
> the way with cloths make the path a source of grudging.
> Indeed, it is necessary, you know, to do honour to the
> gods with these. Since I am a mortal, in no way may I
> walk on embroidered garments without fear. I say to
> honour me as a man, not as a god.)

These words reveal that Agamemnon knows what his proper course of action as a Greek ought to be. They serve to condemn him when he gives in to Clytemnestra's definition of the carpet as the fitting entrance for a triumphant commander. Agamemnon's adoption of oriental ways, the very behavior that should be repugnant to him as a Greek, is therefore not done unknowingly or unconsciously.

By giving Agamemnon the opportunity to walk on the carpet, Clytemnestra allows her husband to demonstrate in public view how oriental he has become. Easterling points out that ornate tapestries were associated with the lifestyle of eastern civilizations. He further explains:

> "By Greek standards it is hubris both to damage the house's substance and to glorify oneself in the process, but the point is that some people might do it, particularly non-Greeks, orientals used to the most extravagant displays of reverence for conquerors or monarchs."18

Clytemnestra skillfully convinces Agamemnon that what is normal practice for an oriental victor is therefore appropriate practice for a Greek king. In doing so she makes no attempt to play down or to conceal the non-Hellenic nature of a king walking on purple carpets. When she asks, τί δ' ἂν δοκεῖ σοι Πρίαμος, εἰ τᾶ δ' ἤνυσεν; (A. 935) "How would Priam act, do you suppose, if he had done these things?", he replies, ἐν ποικίλοις ἂν κάρτα μοι βῆναι δοκεῖ. (A. 936) "I think that he would most certainly have walked on the embroideries." In view of Agamemnon's previous objections (A. 918-25), this exchange should make him suspicious of her motive and should support his conviction that such behavior is unbefitting a Greek. But since Agamemnon has long ago surrendered to Artemis' impious request for a human sacrifice, and since he himself has demolished the temples of the gods at Troy, Agamemnon falls easily into Clytemnestra's trap. His language in yielding to his wife reveals his alien ways:

> ἀλλ' εἰ δοκεῖ σοι ταῦθ', ὑπαί τις ἀρβύλας
> λύοι τάχος, πρόδουλον ἔμβασιν ποδός.
>
> (A. 944-5)
>
> (Well, if it seems good to you, let someone undo
> quickly my strongshoe, the slave shoe of my foot.)

Denniston-Page points out the πρόδουλον ἔμβασιν ποδός "the slave shoe of my foot" is a rather grandiloquent expression and that the idea of a shoe serving as the slave of a man's foot is a grotesque metaphor.[19] For Agamemnon to speak of the protective covering for a foot as a slave betrays his moral blindness, his inability to discern the difference between human beings and material objects.

As Agamemnon prepares to walk down the carpet, he reveals in yet another way how utterly he has embraced the customs of the very barbarians he has conquered. He entrusts to his wife the care of his concubine, Cassandra, as though Clytemnestra were simply an inmate of the house, a "wife" anxious to receive with graciousness another addition to the king's harem. The king does not try to disguise the nature of his relationship with the foreigner:

> αὕτη δὲ πολλῶν χρημάτων ἐξαίρετον
> ἄνθος,[20] στρατοῦ δώρημ', ἐμοὶ ξυνέσπετο.
>
> (A. 954-5)
>
> (And she, this flower, chosen from many things, a gift
> of the army, has been my companion.)

By so publicly demeaning Clytemnestra's status as wife, Agamemnon arouses further her deepest hatred. He creates another reason for her to kill, the sexual motive, one which has not been introduced until now. Earp finds the bitter resentment of Clytemnestra difficult to understand, asserting that since Homeric times concubinage had been considered normal by the Greeks.[21] He fails, it seems, to recognize a vital point in this situation. What may be considered acceptable behavior for a king absent on a foreign campaign and what would be acceptable conduct in full view of a wife and household are two separate things. The Odyssey contains a precedent that shows how a Greek nobleman, one who would be considerate and sensitive to his wife's status, acts in a similar situation. Although King Laertes, Odysseus' father, had purchased Eurykleia as a young maiden at great cost, he had never taken the woman to his bed, out of respect for domestic harmony (Od. I. 430-3). But Agamemnon shows no such discretion and good sense in the presence of his wife. Instead he publicly insults her by parading his own infidelity and by expecting her to comply with his wishes as if her position required unquestioning obedience: τῆν ξένην δὲ πρευμενῶς/τήνδ᾽ ἐκόμιζε, (A. 950-1) "Convey within graciously this foreign woman." Thus as both king and husband Agamemnon presents a distorted vision of Greek ideals.

A final aspect of Agamemnon's grotesqueness is his image as a warrior. The messenger's words portray the king as a soldier actively involved in heavy combat (A. 524-5). But the only tangible possession that Agamemnon has to display for his years of absence at Troy is a new bedmate. Clytemnestra emphasizes this in a speech that boasts of Agamemnon as an adventurer in quite a different area. The speech, which is bold and delivered almost as if to test the nerve of the chorus of Argive elders, is full of sexual allusion (A. 600-5). She calls Agamemnon τὸν ἐμὸν αἰδοῖον πόσιν (A. 600) "my honoured husband." By using the word αἰδοῖόν, which in its adjectival form means "honoured" or "regarded with reverence," she is making a rather rude pun. The noun τὸ αἰδοῖον, which is the neuter form of the adjective, means "the genitals." There is a suggestion, then, that Agamemnon's most noteworthy exploits as a warrior are rather of an amorous, and not of a military nature. A few lines later Clytemnestra refers to her husband as ἐράσμιον (A. 605), a word that is intentionally undignified. Although Victorian translators have commonly rendered the adjective as "darling" (literally, "one who is desired"), a modern equivalent would be closer to the slang expression "lover-boy."

A similar view reappears later drawn more fully in Clytemnestra's exultant speech over the bloody corpses of Agamemnon and Cassandra:

> κεῖται, γυναικὸς τῆσδε λυμαντήριος,
> Χρυσηίδων μείλιγμα τῶν ὑπ' Ἰλίῳ
> ἥ τ' αἰχμάλωτος ἥδε καὶ τερασκοπός
> καὶ κοινόλεκτρος τοῦδε, θεσφατηλόγος
> πιστὴ ξύνευνος, ναυτίλων δὲ σελμάτων
> ἱστοτριβής.[22] ἄτιμα δ' οὐκ ἐπραξάτην.
> ὁ μὲν γὰρ οὕτως, ἡ δέ τοι κύκνου δίκην
> τὸν ὕστατον μέλψασα θανάσιμον γόον
> κεῖται φιλητωρ[23] τοῦδ'...
>
> (A. 1438-46)

> (He lies, the one who destroyed this woman, he, the heart-soother of the foreign women at Troy. This woman lies too, spear-won and prophetic and the bed-mate of this man, his prophetic trustworthy mistress, one busied with the mast of the ship's rowing benches. They have fared as they deserved. For he lies thus and she lies as well, who sang her last mortal groan in the manner of a swan, the lover of this man...)

These words present a tawdry picture of a victorious warrior and his spear-won prize. Agamemnon is described not as a soldier who displayed his skill and valour on the battlefield at Troy, but rather as the "heart-soother" of the foreign women there. Furthermore, Cassandra's value as booty is demeaned by the fact that, although she was recognized for her capacity to foresee the future, she was ineffective because she was unable to prevent the murder of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra seeks to remove any dignity that the chorus and audience might grant to Cassandra by insisting that the Trojan princess served only the sexual appetite of her warrior. The innuendo of a Cassandra "busied with the mast" throughout Agamemnon's voyage home is patent and ugly. By picturing Agamemnon and his war-captive in terms more suitable to a "playboy" and his paramour, Clytemnestra shows her judgement of him both as a shallow warrior and a lecherous, ill-starred lover.

Agamemnon is at once both horrible and comic. The horror he evokes goes beyond that supposed by Easterling of a man who, though plainly in a dangerous position upon his return home, is yet so confident in his ability to control the factionalism within his house and city.[24] The sensation of horror is of a more encompassing nature: it arises in part from the fact that as a victor, Agamemnon has brought more grief to those most committed to his cause than to the enemy. Moreover, instead of adhering to the customs and ideals of a Greek way of life, Agamemnon has openly invested every word and decision upon his arrival with an aura of oriental despotism. The expedition that was launched to restore the inviolability of a man's home and family, rights protected by Zeus as guardian of guest and host, has been turned into a spectacle involving the deaths of Iphigenia and other Greek kinsmen as the prelude and the conclusion of battle. It is Clytemnestra who brings out the comic aspect of Agamemnon by manipulating him so that he responds like a blowhard. The man is so blinded by altered values that the embarrassing presence of Cassandra emphasizes his allegiance to Aphrodite rather than to the masculine responsibilities demanded by Ares, god of war. Indeed, Clytemnestra's view of her husband, though it is admittedly biased, is proved to be the correct one, not only by the "evidence" she presents, but also by the effect that Agamemnon's self-complacent demeanor produces upon the audience. Like the chorus, the audience should least desire to be sympathetic to Clytemnestra's sinister intentions. It is therefore all the more horrible and ludicrous that the distortion visible in the characterization of Agamemnon causes the audience to react in a similarly distorted manner; they understand emotionally the reasons for yet more fruitless bloodshed in the house.

The effect of the grotesque is that it undermines Agamemnon's stature as a noble, tragic figure who is deserving of the support later given to him and his cause by Electra, Orestes, the chorus of libation bearers and Apollo. This undercutting allows the audience to examine Agamemnon's actions from other perspectives; it succeeds in making us question the motivation behind his decisions. The chief actions to be judged are Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigenia and his impious destruction of Troy. He is cast as the instrument of justice, the eagle sent by Zeus to avenge a despoiled nest. But as a grotesque figure, Agamemnon appears unworthy to function in such an exalted role, and so his actions seem predicated not upon a renewal of Greek principles, but upon adventure, self-aggrandizement and pleasure. It is precisely because of the device of undercutting that much of the tragic impact of Agamemnon's death is lost. Both he and his expectation of a noble welcome home become the object of prevarication and cruel irony, as is manifested in Clytemnestra's ominous reference to what awaits Agamemnon inside:

> ...τὰ μὲν γὰρ ἐστίας μεσομφάλου
> ἕστηκεν ἤδη μῆλα πρὸς σφαγὰς πάρος.
>
> (A. 1056-7)
>
> (For the sheep already stand before the central hearth
> for the purpose of slaughter.)

Although the words allude to animals chosen for sacrifice in thanksgiving for Agamemnon's safe return, Clytemnestra's emphasis upon the word σφαγὰς "slaughter," a word found earlier in the description of Agamemnon's murder of their daughter (A. 209), leaves no doubt about her intention to take revenge upon her husband. Though once a mighty king, Agamemnon is led meekly to his death. There was ease in the way she bested him in a debate over the significance of walking on the carpet. Now Agamemnon, the majestic eagle of Zeus, becomes himself a victim; but he inspires none of the pity associated with the innocent instruments of sacrifice. If it is the taking of Troy that has weakened Agamemnon's intelligence and spirit, it is Clytemnestra who plays upon his distorted self-image to destroy him.

Notes

1. Gagarin, p. 91-2.

2. Ibid. p. 94.

3. Ibid. p. 110-11.

4. Beck, p. 73.

5. Dawe, R.D. "Inconsistency of Plot and Character in Aeschylus." PCPhS, 9 (1963) p. 50.

6. Aeschylus. Agamemnon. 3 Vols. Edited with a commentary by Eduard Fraenkel. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950, Vol. 2, p. 44.

7. Aeschylus. Agamemnon. Edited by J.D. Denniston and D. Page. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957, p. 149.

8. Fraenkel, Vol. 2, p. 228.

9. Aeschylus. The Oresteia of Aeschylus. 2 Vols. Edited with a commentary by George Thomson. Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1966, Vol. 2, p. 44.

10. Aeschylus. Agamemnon. Introduction, commentary and translation by A.W. Verrall. London: Macmillan, 1889, p. 51.

11. There has been much controversy over the inclusion of this line in the play (l. 527). Fraenkel (Vol. 2, p. 266) rejects it on the grounds that the destruction of the holy places by Greeks would be too shocking for a Greek audience. Denniston-Page, on the other hand, accepts the line because Clytemnestra had earlier (l. 338ff.) made it clear that this is the very thing that the army must not do, and here we are told that they have done it.

12. Rose, H.J. A Commentary on the Surviving Plays of Aeschylus. 2 Vols. Amsterdam: N.V. Noord-Hollandsche Uitgevers Maatschappij, 1957, p. 59-60.

13. Denniston-Page, p. 140.

14. Verrall, p. 96.

15. Fraenkel, Vol. 2, p. 371-4. Fraenkel upholds a portrait of Agamemnon as a gracious Greek gentleman (p. 441). He is thus forced to downplay the significant overtones of the term μεταιτίους as it must apply to the gods.

16. Denniston-Page, p. 151.

17. The verb he uses (σέβειν) is normally applied only to the reverence paid to a god.

18. Easterling, P.E. "Presentation of Character in Aeschylus." *G&R*. 20 (1973), p. 11.

19. Denniston-Page, p. 153.

20. The word ἄνθος "flower" or "blossom" used here is reminiscent of the image referred to earlier of the sea blossoming with the corpses of dead sailors (A. 658-60). Brought in at this point, it adds a further note of foreboding because it binds together the deaths caused by this expedition with one of its few tangible results, the acquisition of a concubine for Agamemnon.

21. Earp, F.R. "Studies in Character: Agamemnon." *G&R*. 19 (1950), p. 55. This view appears to be drawn largely from epic, although Earp does not try to prove his statement in any way.

22. Here read ἱστοτριβής in place of the ἰσοτριβής of Murray's text. The latter word is translated as "pressing the benches like others", which does not describe the nature of Cassandra's shipboard activity as precisely as does "busied with the mast."

23. Here read πιλήτωρ rather than the πιλήτως of Murray's text. The context calls for a noun in this position rather than an adverb which makes the meaning much less clear.

24. Easterling, p. 9-10.

Chapter Five

Clytemnestra

The figure of Clytemnestra involves distortion, since we see in her role a violation of a fundamental concept of Greek existence, that is, the separation of male and female prerogatives.[1] A modern audience may be expected to look upon Clytemnestra's behavior with a greater sympathy and understanding, but this would not be true of the ancient viewer. He would interpret the sphere of activity for a male and female narrowly, if not as mutually exclusive. To this viewer the mingling of male and female in Clytemnestra's personality and behavior would appear disturbingly grotesque.

Aeschylus' delineation of Clytemnestra as a novel and daring female character has resulted in much confusion and disagreement among commentators. Some see her as a thoroughly evil, calculating woman who uses the death of her daughter as a convenient pretext for killing her husband so that she can replace him with her lover. Recent critics view Clytemnestra's action as Aeschylus' attempt to assert a case for women's rights. As an example of the former view, R.M. Doyle attributes the murder of Agamemnon to Clytemnestra's selfishness: she does not act out of love for Iphigenia, but because of wounded pride as a mother and a sensual desire to install Aegisthus in her husband's place.[2] On the other hand, H.L. Tracy sees Clytemnestra as a brilliant portrayal of a person torn by agonizing strains caused first, by the hostility of her own people, secondly, by her need to dissemble a royal welcome of Agamemnon so as to allay further suspicion and, thirdly, by her bitter resentment over the murder of Iphigenia.[3] According to Kitto, Clytemnestra is equally an agent in a divine and human drama; she is "the Wrath called into existence by Artemis to avenge the hare lawlessly slain by the eagles of Zeus."[4] Winnington-Ingram ascribes her motivation for murder to a jealousy of Agamemnon and his status as a man.[5] Leon Golden, taking an extreme view, sees no justification for Clytemnestra's revenge and characterizes her as "a complete and resourceful hypocrite who invents excuses as she needs them."[6] Aya Betensky explains Clytemnestra's actions as in defense of the house, the οἶκος, which she has identified with her own fate rather than with that of its proper master, Agamemnon.[7] Since these divergent opinions are all based upon the same evidence, that of the trilogy itself, it seems fair to conclude that the diversity is the result of the scholars' individual reactions to the conflict between the role and power of male and female.

One of the things that makes Clytemnestra the most interesting figure in Greek tragedy is that, while she possesses the intellectual characteristics of a male, she applies them in defense of what Gagarin calls "female values"[8]: a concern for home, children and her relationship to her husband. Such an adoption of masculine traits to assert and guard the feminine values represents, to the Greeks, a clash of incompatibles. It is what makes the figure of Clytemnestra grotesque.

This grotesqueness is further intensified by the reversal of normal male and female roles. Not only does Clytemnestra wield masculine authority, but in so doing she forces the men with whom she deals into a submissive and traditionally feminine role.

The importance of Clytemnestra's unusual personality as a woman is indicated in the first reference to her in the play. It is significant that the Watchman does not speak of her by name, but rather uses her most prominent quality to convey the reason for the apprehension that clouds the words of the Prologue:

> ...ὧδε γὰρ κρατεῖ
> γυναικὸς ανδρόβουλον ἐλπίζον κέαρ.
>
> (A. 10-11)
>
> (For thus does the hopeful heart of a woman of manly counsel rule.)

The verb κρατεῖ "rules" or "wields power" denotes an activity proper only to men. "Ruling" is a male function as the chorus suggests when greeting Clytemnestra:

> ἥκω σεβίζων σόν, Κλυταιμήστρα, κράτος·
> δίκη γάρ, ἐστι φωτὸς ἀρχηγοῦ τίεν
> γυναῖκ᾽ ἐρημωθέντος ἄρσενος θρόνου.
>
> (A. 258-60)
>
> (I come reverencing your rule, Clytemnestra; for it is right to pay honour to the wife of the chief man when the throne has been left empty of a male.)

The language of the chorus scarcely conceals their hostility toward Clytemnestra. The only reason that she merits their reverence, a word normally applied to a man's honour of a god, is because she occupies the place of her absent husband. Indeed, they reveal their anger or ill ease at her unique position by referring to him not as Clytemnestra's husband, but as a male, which is indicated by the generic term ἄρσενος.[9]

In a similar way the word ἀνδρόβουλον (A. 11) "of manly counsel" points to her masculinity. "Taking counsel" is an attribute normally associated with men. This is reinforced later in the play when Agamemnon states that, in order to deal with civic and religious matters, he will establish common assemblies and in meetings they will take counsel (A. 844-6). He uses the words βουλευσόμεθα (A. 846) "we shall take counsel" and βουλευτέον (A. 847) "counsel must be taken." Deliberation is shown to be a masculine activity, for Agamemnon in this instance is addressing the chorus, and not his wife, who is to have no part in the disposal of these matters.

In contrast to the masculine κρατεῖ and ἀνδρόβουλον are the words γυναικός "of a woman" and ἐλπίζον "hopeful," which have feminine associations. Verrall points out that γυναικός is generic in meaning and that the noun ἐλπίς "hope" or "expectation," to which ἐλπίζον is related, has a broader application. It also includes the ideas of "fancy" and "imagination"; for this reason it was a characteristic conventionally attributed to women.[10] The chorus clearly plays on this association when they seek to dissuade Clytemnestra of the truth of her report that Agamemnon is soon to return: εὐαγγέλοισιν ἐλπίσιν θυηπολεῖς, (A. 262) "You busy yourself with sacrifices in hopes of good news." The old men try to show Clytemnestra her proper place as a woman by suggesting that only a woman would be foolish enough to believe in such signs as a beacon of fire. Winnington-Ingram sums up the grotesqueness in this initial presentation of Clytemnestra by pointing out that the succession in the phrase of κρατεῖ, γυναικός, ἀνδρόβουλον, ἐλπίζον duplicates the combinations of opposites in Clytemnestra (male, female, male, female).[11]

In the Agamemnon, Clytemnestra exhibits other traits normally attributed to men, in addition to the wielding of power κράτος: these are the masculinity of the thought processes that are reflected in her speech, and the masculine way in which she inflicts and enjoys deeds of violence.

The power Clytemnestra wields is evident in the Prologue spoken by the Watchman, for it is she, and not Aegisthus, who has posted him to keep watch for a signal of Agamemnon's return. That the Watchman considers this state of affairs unnatural is revealed by his comment that the house is "not being managed in the most noble fashion as in the time before" (οὐχ ὡς τὰ πρόσθ' ἄριστα διαπονουμένου. A. 19), and that this situation has inspired in him a fear that robs him of his sleep (A. 12-17). She exercises a similar control over the members of the chorus of Argive elders. After they have greeted her (A. 258-60), they seek her reasons for undertaking the sacrifices, but quickly add that it will be quite acceptable to them if she wishes to remain silent: οὐδὲ σιγώσῃ φθόνος (A. 263) "but if you choose to remain silent there will be no ill-will." This addition to their request illustrates that even in small matters it is she who is in command. It conveys their unwillingness to make demands upon her good-will.

Her ability to assert authority over men is reiterated in the concluding scene of the Agamemnon. The Argive elders finally confront in Aegisthus an opponent who is more a match for their feeble strength. They suddenly rediscover their lost valour as they draw their swords to do battle with him (A. 1612ff.). Clytemnestra immediately regains control of the situation by dispatching the pugnacious chorus to their dwellings (A. 1657-61). But the two sides continue to toss verbal barbs; it is Clytemnestra who ends the quarrel with a demonstration of her complete mastery. To Aegisthus she says:

> μῆ προτιμήσῃς ματαίων τῶνδ' ὑλαγμάτων· (ἐγῶ)
> καὶ σὺ θήσομεν κρατοῦντε τῶνδε δωμάτων (καλῶς).
>
> (A. 1672-3)
>
> (Pay no attention to these empty yelpings; for you and I
> ruling this house together shall set things in order.)

Although the participle κρατοῦντε "ruling" is in the dual number and the verb θήσομεν "we shall set" is first person plural, the emphatic word order and the rhythm achieved by the first person pronoun ἐγώ "I" show forcefully who the real master of the house is.[12]

Clytemnestra's motivation for seizing and holding power appears to go beyond simple revenge against Agamemnon. Indeed, she could have achieved this objective without the degree of control visible in her position at the end of the first play. Winnington-Ingram maintains that she acts not merely out of vengeance or sexual jealousy, although these reasons play their part, but out of jealousy of Agamemnon himself and his status as a man.[13] It is his status which grants him the right to exert power over others. Aya Betensky also sees Clytemnestra's desire for power as important, but in a different way. In examining Clytemnestra's speech before the death of Agamemnon (A. 958-74), Betensky notes that the imagery of the speech shows "a credible longing for that natural harmony between the house and its master which a husband is supposed to provide."[14] She observes that the passage includes seven references to οἶκος and δόμος, terms both meaning "house." It thus seems fair to conclude that Clytemnestra's perception of her role within the house is radically altered from a woman's traditional function as the loyal keeper of the hearth and home. Because of the damage that Agamemnon has done to the house by wasting its material resources and by destroying its offspring, Clytemnestra has been compelled to transform her domestic responsibilities in order to preserve and protect what remains of the dynasty of the house's master, Agamemnon.[15] If this view is accepted, it explains why Clytemnestra, having gone to such lengths to avenge one child, Iphigenia, then deprives her son, Orestes, of his legal inheritance and of his rightful control over the οἶκος. She probably sees Orestes as a scaled-down version of his father, and because he is a man, as one who will be capable of doing the same amount of damage to the house.

Clytemnestra's speeches reveal attitudes of thought more normally considered by Aeschylus' contemporaries as typical of males. The most notable of these speeches is that which contains Clytemnestra's sighting of the beacon and her account of its journey from Troy to Argos (A. 281-315). This speech is dominated by language that suggests feats of masculine strength and endurance. The beacon moves with vigour, as shown in Clytemnestra's choice of forceful verbs and verbal phrases: νωτίσαι (A. 286) "skimming the back;" ὑπερθοροῦσα (A. 297) "having overlept;" ἤγειρεν (A. 299) "roused;" ἔσκηφεν (A. 301 and 308) "hurled;" ὤτρυνε (A. 304) "quickened." Among these are words which depict the torch of fire as if it were a mighty warrior, growing and revelling in its stamina as it reaches its destination: πλέον καίουσα τῶν εἰρημένων (A. 301) "burning more than those mentioned before;" ἰσχῦς πορευτοῦ λαμπάδος (A. 287) "the strength of the travelling torch;" σθένουσα λαμπὰς (A. 296) "the torch having strength;" ἀφθόνῳ μένει (A. 305) "with ungrudging strength." Clytemnestra's vision of the torch also conveys its resolution, its rejection of any delay or obstacle in its course: ὁ δ' οὔτι μέλλων οὐδ' ἀφρασμόνως ὕπνῳ/νικώμενος παρῆκεν ἀγγέλου μέρος· (A. 290-1) "and it, neither delaying nor being overcome heedlessly by sleep, by no means neglected the role of messenger;" φάος δὲ τηλέπομπον οὐκ ἠναίνετο/φρουρά (A. 300-1) "and the guard did not reject the far-gleaming light." Each of these qualities of forcefulness, resolution and physical stamina lend an air of credibility to Clytemnestra's vision of the beacon signal. In seeking to convince the Argive elders that such a torch is a harbinger of Agamemnon's imminent and longed-for return, she instinctively clothes her vision in terms of masculine activity.

Clytemnestra is herself a woman much like the beacon that she describes. She is not given to idle lyric reflection in the face of a task. Having determined to kill her husband, she sets all her energies in that direction, with all of the drive and natural skill she possesses. She brooks no delay as is illustrated by her exchange with the chorus after the first choral ode (A. 264-80). Here she reacts with ill-concealed annoyance at their unwillingness to accept her word about the fall of Troy. She responds to them as if they were children, for whom language must remain on a primitive level, as is depicted in the lack of connectives present in: "Troy being Achaean. Do I speak clearly? (A. 269)." There is a similar impatience when she refuses to spend time trying to communicate with Cassandra before entering the house to murder her husband. οὖτοι θυράιᾳ τῇδ' ἐμοῖ σχολῆ πάρ/ τρίβειν· (A. 1055-6) "Indeed I have no time to waste by this door," she snaps, eager to be about her bloody task.

The resolution and enthusiasm evident in the beacon speech reflect Clytemnestra's own approach to the impending murder. There is not one line of the trilogy that suggests any hesitation, reservations or regret on her part concerning the murder of her husband. Her actions are indicative of her calculation, spirit and determination. If her behavior is compared with that of Agamemnon in a similar situation involving a serious moral choice, it is clear how masculine Clytemnestra is. When Agamemnon had been told by the seer at Aulis that a further sacrifice was required, he showed no hesitation, once the decision had been made, in giving himself unreservedly to the terrible deed with resolution, enthusiasm and attention to detail (A. 218-34). Clytemnestra shows this same typically masculine enthusiasm and attention to detail in the face of a bloody task in her planning and carrying out of the murder.

The beacon speech also demonstrates the military cast of Clytemnestra's mind. Her description of the beacon's successive movements from stage to stage reveals a general's concern with precise planning and strategy. Moreover, many of the words in the passage are found elsewhere in a military context: ἐκπέμπων (A. 281) "sending out;" ἐξεδέξατο (A. 285) "received from another;" παραγγείλασα (A.289) "passing the word along."[16]

The outlook of a military leader is even more evident in the account of the seige and capture of Troy (A. 320-50), which follows the beacon speech. Many of the circumstances Clytemnestra describes are alien to the traditional realm of feminine concerns and experiences. Golden notes this by observing:

> "... we must notice the excitement and interest in military detail that Clytemnestra shows when she goes on to describe the activities of the Greek victors. She evokes from her imagination a picture, striking in its realism, of the logistical operations of the Greek army on the night of victory. With an interest, familiarity, and accuracy that belongs not to a woman but to a professional soldier, she visualizes a scene of victory when the hardships of nightly bivouacs under the open sky can finally be exchanged for victor's rights in the houses of the conquered (330-36)."[17]

Even though Clytemnestra is a general's wife, it is unusual that she should possess this much knowledge of the details of military life.

Golden's assertion that this is more appropriate to a professional soldier is supported by the similarity of the detail in her speech to that of the messenger when he describes the hardships the army endured beneath the walls of Troy (A. 551-66). What Clytemnestra's speech suggests is that she is capable of thinking like a soldier, and thus of planning and carrying out the murder of her husband. The positive effect upon the chorus of such a masculine portrayal of the suffering and hardship at Troy is obvious, as they admit:

> γύναι, ϰατ' ἄνδρα σώφρον' εὐφρόνως λέγεις.
>
> (A. 351)
>
> (Woman, you speak favourably as befits a sensible man.)

Clytemnestra exhibits a masculine boldness and daring in many of her speeches. She herself acknowledges the inappropriateness in a woman of forward speech:

> ἄνδρες πολῖται, πρέσβος 'Αργείων τόδε,
> οὐϰ αἰσχυνοῦμαι τοῦς φιλάνορας τρόπους
> λέξαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς· ἐν χρόνῳ δ' ἀποφθίνει
> τὸ τάρβος ἀνθρώποισιν.
>
> (A. 855-8)
>
> (My fellow citizens, this august assembly of Argives, I am not ashamed to speak of my husband/man-loving ways before you. With time my awe among men fades.)

But for Clytemnestra boldness goes far beyond merely speaking in public before men, a thing which no respectable Athenian woman of the time would do. In her speeches she deliberately goads the chorus of old men to challenge what she says and to expose her duplicity. For example, in the above speech, she talks of her φιλάνορας ways. The word φιλάνορας can be understood in two ways, as "husband-loving" proclaiming her devotion to Agamemnon, or as "man-loving" flaunting her liaison with Aegisthus.

Her assurance can also be observed in the message which she gives to the messenger to relay to her husband:

> \- ταῦτ' ἀπάγγειλον πόσει·
> ἥκειν ὅπως τάχιστ' ἐράσμιον πόλει·
> γυναῖκα πιστὴν δ' ἐν δόμοις εὕροι μολὼν
> οἵανπερ, οὖν ἔλειπε, δωμάτων κύνα,
> ἐσθλὴν ἐκείνψ, πολεμίαν τοῖς δύσφροσιν,
> καὶ τἄλλ' ὁμοίαν πάντα, σημαντήριον
> οὐδεν διαφθείρασαν ἐν μήκει χρόνου.
> οὐδ' οἶδα τέρψιν οὐδ' ἐπίψογον φάτιν
> ἄλλου πρὸς ἀνδρὸς μᾶλλον ἢ χαλκοῦ βαφάς.
>
> (A. 604-12)

> (- Announce these things to my husband; that he, my darling, come as quickly as possible to the city. And when he has come, let him find in his house a faithful woman, just as the one he left, the watchdog of the house, noble to him, an enemy to those hard-hearted, and the same with respect to all other things, the seal in no way broken in the length of time. I have known no pleasure nor censorious rumour from another man no more than the dipping of bronze.)

Her speech is full of falsehood in that she represents herself as the perfect picture of the faithful Greek wife. As a watchdog she has not only invited an intruder into the household of Agamemnon, but she has also demeaned the role of watchman by making the vigilance of another man result in the betrayal of his lord (A. 1-11). In seeking pleasure with Aegisthus she has both broken the seal of her wifely chastity and been the subject of scandalous rumour in Argos (A. 36-9). Furthermore, she has not been an enemy to Agamemnon's enemies, but a friend. By giving privileges to Aegisthus she thereby provides her lover with an opportunity to seek revenge for his own particular reasons.

Although the claims she makes in this speech are false, they serve as a bold indication of her real attitude and intention. Agamemnon will indeed find a watchdog guarding the house, but, since he himself is guilty of despoiling the wealth and offspring of the house, it is he whose return must be guarded against. As well he will find a woman who is faithful, but her fidelity is to her vow of revenge, not to her husband. By saying that she is an enemy to those who are hard-hearted, Clytemnestra appears to be pledging war upon his enemies; but it is Agamemnon's unfeeling and impious heart that slew their daughter, and it thus is he against whom her hostility will be directed. Her usage of the word σημαντήριον (A. 609), which means a mark or seal on anything to be protected, is another allusion to her determination to avenge her daughter's murder. By referring to it publicly, Clytemnestra proclaims her intention as a pledge or as a contract; the fact that she speaks of the seal as intact suggests that Clytemnestra has not wavered or altered her plan. Finally, the dipping of bronze alludes to the sword which Clytemnestra will dip in the blood of Agamemnon to fulfil this contract. Bronze is tempered by being dipped in cold water; so too, Agamemnon is judged and found wanting in his bath. This speech in its audacious combination of truth and lies is a production of sheer nerve before a chorus who appears to know or at least to suspect what she intends. Every image is a test of their desire and ability to expose her plans.

Clytemnestra fabricates an even greater pack of lies in front of Agamemnon himself. She claims that she often attempted suicide, deceived by the many false rumours of his death, and that others had to use force to keep her from this course (A. 874-6). This is indeed a daring tactic on her part since the story involves the participation of others, who could easily deny her words. She also claims to have been so disturbed by his absence that the slightest buzzing of a gnat awoke her, and that when she was awake, her sufferings on his account were greater than when she was asleep (A. 891-4). Such an assertion of supposed devotion is clearly superficial and false, and yet may contain some hints about her true feelings. Given the context of her other remarks, one may speculate that if she were easily roused from sleep, it was more likely out of the expectation of his arrival and the vengeance it would bring. Similarly, if she had sorrow while awake, it was at the thought of the cruel and gruesome death of her daughter, which Agamemnon had brought about.

Another obviously unfeminine trait of Clytemnestra is her desire to do battle. This is most forcefully drawn in the carpet scene in which she engages with Agamemnon in a battle of wills. She is not satisfied merely to kill him, but she must first show herself superior to him by defeating him publicly in verbal conflict. Agamemnon himself comments on how improper such behavior is for a woman:

> οὖτοι γυναικός ἐστιν ἱμείρειν μάχης.
>
> (A. 940)

(It is indeed not characteristic of a woman to lust after battle).

It is rather the prerogative of men as evidenced by the fact that the young woman, Iphigenia, was sacrificed so that the men becalmed at Aulis, who were φιλόμαχοι (A. 230) "lusting after battle," could set out for Troy.

The masculine attribute of Clytemnestra which contributes most to the grotesque distortion of her character is her capacity for executing deeds of violence and the relish she derives from so doing. If she had not enjoyed the excitement of bloodletting, she could have easily planned the murder and then had someone else, especially Aegisthus, carry out the sword work. But she takes upon herself the role of Justice by wielding the sword against Agamemnon. The actual murder is less remarkable than the unusual delight that Clytemnestra shows in hinting at the death-blows to come and describing them in gruesome detail afterward.

The joy she feels in anticipation of the murder is thinly concealed as she describes in front of Agamemnon and the chorus of elders the sorrows that she supposedly suffered in her husband's absence. She blames her suffering upon the frequency of rumours of his death which came to the house during that time; her words contain no delicacy or "womanly" reticence. She concludes rather bluntly:

> καὶ τραυμάτων μὲν εἰ τόσων ἐτύγχανεν
> ἀνὴρ ὅδ' ὡς πρὸς οἶκον ὠχετεύετο
> φάτις, τέτρηται δικτύου, πλέω λέγειν.
> εἰ δ' ἦν τεθνηκώς, ὡς ἐπλήθυον λόγοι,
> τρισώματός τἂν, Γηρυῶν ὁ δεύτερος,
> [πολλην ἄνωθεν, τὴν κάτω γὰρ οὐ λέγω,]
> χθονὸς τρίμοιρον χλαῖναν ἐξηύχει λαβεῖν,
> ἅπαξ ἑκάστῳ κατθανῶν μορφώματι.
> (A. 866-73)

> (And as for wounds, if this man had taken as many as rumour led by conduits to the house, he would have been pierced more times to count than a net. And if he had died as the stories multiplied, he, a second three-bodied Geryon, would boast to have received a three-fold cloak of earth [much above but that below I do not mention] having died once for each form.)

Here we see what Houghton calls her "harsh and cuttingly raw" speech.[18] Even the form of the sentence as an unfulfilled supposition hints broadly at the imminent danger to Agamemnon's life, a fate which the grammatical form fails to conceal. The continual emphasis upon the appearance of gashes as contained in words such as τραυμάτων "wounds" and τέτρητα "pierced" as well as the use of the word δικτύου "net" shows precisely the manner of Clytemnestra's revenge upon her husband. Having ensnared him in a net, she will pierce Agamemnon so repeatedly that the number of his wounds will resemble the holes in a net. The degradation of such a death for a nobleman is further dramatized by the comparison of him to the grotesque creature, Geryon. In some stories this creature is said to have had three separate bodies, while in others he is reputed to have been born with three heads, six hands and three bodies which were joined at the waist.[19] By comparing Agamemnon to Geryon, Clytemnestra is being deliberately offensive and insulting. By saying that, as a second Geryon, Agamemnon would have died three times and have received a threefold burial, she foreshadows the three blows that will actually kill him. There is in her a sense of bitter regret that Agamemnon can only die once; for what he did, he deserves to suffer an ignominious death three times.

There is no evidence from the speeches of Clytemnestra that she hesitates or shrinks from the task of murder or that she considers what she is about to do as distasteful but necessary. Instead, the graphic detail of her speeches points to an enjoyment and to an eager anticipation of her bloody task. After the murder, this joy is clearly visible as she exults before the chorus, describing her deed in loving detail:

> ἕστηκα δ' ἔνθ' ἔπαισ' ἐπ' ἐξειργασμένοις
> οὕτω δ' ἔπραξα - καὶ τάδ' οὐκ ἀρνήσομαι- 1380
> ὡς μήτε φεύγειν μήτ' ἀμύνεσθαι μόρον.
> ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστον, ὥσπερ ἰχθύων,
> περιστιχίζω, πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν,
> παίω δέ νιν δίς· κἀν δυοῖν οἰμωγμάτοιν
> μεθῆκεν αὐτοῦ κῶλα· καὶ πεπτωκότι 1385
> τρίτην ἐπενδίδωμι, τοῦ κατὰ χθονός,
> Ἅιδου, νεκρῶν σωτῆρος, εὐκταίαν χάριν.
> οὕτω τὸν αὑτοῦ θυμὸν ὁρμαίνει πεσών,
> κἀκφυσιῶν ὀξεῖαν αἵματος, σφαγὴν
> βάλλει μ' ἐρεμνῇ ψακάδι φοινίας δρόσου, 1390
> χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἧσσον ἧ, διοσδότῳ
> γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν.
>
> (A. 1379-92)
>
> (I stand where I struck after the deed has been done. I did it in such a way - and I will not deny these things- that he might not escape or fend off death. The inextricable casting net just like the one used for fish, I put all around, the wealth of the cloak bringing misfortune, and I strike him, twice. And within two wails of lament, he let go his limbs there. And I strike him a third blow after he has fallen, as a thank-offering accompanied by prayer for Hades, the saviour of corpses under the earth. Thus he falls and gasps out his life, and breathing out the swift slaughter of blood, he hits me with the dark sprinkling of bloody dew, as I rejoice in no way less than the crop does with Zeus-given gladness at the birth-pains of the bud.)

The entire speech underlines her personal involvement in the murder and her delight in recalling each moment of the conquest. First, she appears herself as the herald of the event. This in itself is unusual since in tragedy it is customary for someone such as a messenger to describe a murder, and not the one who has committed it. Secondly, by her use of first person singular verbs seven times within eight lines (A. 1379-86) Clytemnestra assumes and boasts of her role as the prime mover, and not just as an accomplice of the plot. Even though in lines 1387ff. she allows the focus to shift to her victim as he gasps out his life, she quickly re-establishes her vital connection with the deed when she describes the blood striking her body (A. 1387-92). The pleasure she takes in committing the murder is conveyed by the word χαίρουσαν (A. 1391) "rejoicing," and by the way in which she recounts much of the event using the present tense. Fraenkel suggests that in telling the story she probably uses miming gestures to re-enact it.[20] It seems probable that in relating the murder to the chorus and audience she is reliving it and thereby prolonging the joy she felt during the act itself.

All of Clytemnestra's masculine qualities disconcert the chorus, but her capacity to do harm and to enjoy its consequences appears to horrify them the most. The chorus' shock arises less from the murder of Agamemnon than from the fact that it was executed by the hands of a woman. At first they try to find some external cause to explain her unwomanly behavior, suggesting that perhaps Clytemnestra is under the influence of some drug:

> τί κακόν ὦ γύναι,
> χθονοτρεφὲς ἐδανὸν ἢ ποτὸν

πασαμένα ῥυτᾶς ἐξ ἁλὸς ὄρμενον
τόδ' ἐπέθου θύος, δημοθρόους τ' ἀράς;

(A. 1406-9)

(Having tasted what evil food bred from the earth, or drink roused from the running sea, were you bringing on yourself this sacrifice and the curses clamoured by the people?)

When the lucid fury of her reply cancels this possibility, the chorus is forced to come to the dreadful conclusion that she, a woman, planned and carried out the murder. This thought is so unpleasant and disturbing that they immediately pray for death as an escape from it:

φεῦ, τίς ἂν ἐν τάχει, μὴ πεδιώδυνος,
    μηδὲ δεμνιοτήρης,
μόλοι τὸν ἀεὶ φέρουσ' ἐν ἡμῖν
Μοῖρ' ἀτέλευτον ὕπνον, δαμέντος
    φύλακος εὐμενεστάτου [καὶ]
πολέα τλάντος γυναικὸς διαί· πρὸς γυναι-
    κος δ' ἀπέφθισεν βίον.

(A. 1448-54)

(Alas, would that some Fate, not exceedingly painful, not lingering, would come quickly bearing to us sleep always eternal, since our most kindly guardian has been overcome because of an all-daring woman; at the hands of a woman he lost his life.)

Their repetition of the fact that it was a woman who overcame Agamemnon shows that this violates any reality which the chorus can either comprehend or tolerate. It is not surprising,then, that they can no longer view Clytemnestra in completely human terms,and that they begin to view her as a mingling of forms which detaches her from humanity:

> κράτος (τ) ἰσόψυχον ἐκ γυναικῶν[21]
> καρδιόδηκτον ἐμοὶ κρατύνεις,
> ἐπὶ δὲ σώματος δίκαν [μοι]
> κόρακος ἐχθροῦ σταθεὶς ἐννόμως ὕμνον ὑ-
> μνεῖν ἐπεύχεται (κακόν).
>
> (A. 1470-4)
>
> (You wield power from a woman, a power equal in spirit to a man's power, gnawing my heart; standing over the body in the manner of a hostile crow, you boast to hymn the hymn within the law.)

The chorus can only treat her as a grotesque figure to express their repugnance, as a carrion bird standing over a body. In their eyes Clytemnestra behaves in a manner that is alien to what is considered normal practice for a Greek woman: she wields power like a man; she has plotted and executed the murder of her husband with chilly masculine pragmatism; finally, she attempts to mask her aberrant behavior by claiming religious sanction for an act which, to them, is impious. Later when the chorus addresses the mutilated corpse of Agamemnon, they revise their estimation of Clytemnestra more drastically by speaking of their king as one "caught in the web of a female spider," (A. 1493) The image captures not only the ignominy of Agamemnon's defeat, but also the grotesqueness of the creature who wrought it.

Clytemnestra's grotesque masculinity in the Agamemnon is especially obvious by the way in which she compels the men around her to assume a woman's role. Although the chorus patronize her because she is, for better or for worse, their temporary superior, they react to her assertiveness in ways traditionally feminine. They acknowledge her control over the household and populace. In addition, as Winnington-Ingram points out, "It is the male chorus and not Clytemnestra whose beliefs and disbeliefs are conditioned by their hopes and fears."[22] This is amply demonstrated by their mixed reactions to the news of the beacon (A. 264-80) and their flagrant lack of decisiveness at the death cries of Agamemnon; they hear his screams, but cannot formulate a plan of action (A. 1346ff.). It is only when they face the even more feminine Aegisthus that the chorus assumes any air of masculine courage (A. 1625ff.)

Aegisthus is called γύναι (A. 1625) "woman" by the chorus, thus condemning the man as a subservient figure in his relationship with Clytemnestra. The chorus refers to him as οἰκουρὸς (A. 1626) a "stay-at-home," an apt description of one who played no part in the Trojan expedition nor in the plot to murder Agamemnon. Despite Aegisthus' protestations to the contrary (A. 1604-11), it is Clytemnestra who strikes the fatal blows. This strongly suggests that, although Aegisthus may have provided moral support, the plot was from its inception her own scheme. It is significant that Aegisthus remains hidden and does not appear until Agamemnon is dead. Thus in the "war" against Agamemnon, Aegisthus is demoted to the role of "housewife" in contrast to Clytemnestra's "generalship."

Even Agamemnon himself is reduced to feminine behavior when confronted with Clytemnestra's forcefulness. This is evident in the carpet scene in which she successfully influences him to act contrary to his knowledge of acceptable Greek conduct. He himself underlines the reversal of their roles when he tells her that it is not characteristic of a woman to lust for battle (A. 940). Such yearning for strife is a sign of Clytemnestra's masculine inclinations. By seeking to avoid battle and by so readily yielding to her specious arguments Agamemnon shows that he has exchanged masculine firmness of mind for feminine whimsy. He walks on the carpet, thereby allowing himself to be pampered in a way which by his own admission (A. 918-919) is more appropriate to a woman. The depth of their reversal of roles is most accurately characterized by Cassandra who cries in her visionary trance:

> ἆ ἆ, ἰδού· ἄπεχε τῆς βοὸς
> τὸν ταῦρον· ἐν πέπλοισιν
> μελαγκέρῳ λαβοῦσα μηχανήματι
> τύπτει· πίτνει δ' (ἐν) ἐνύδρῳ τεύχει.
>
> (A. 1125-8)
>
> (Oh, oh, look, look! Keep away the bull from the cow.
> Having taken him in the robes, she strikes him with the
> black-horned device; and he falls in the watery bath.)

The bull, the one who possesses the black-horned device of murder, is Clytemnestra, the cow, Agamemnon.

Although it is Clytemnestra's overly masculine qualities that disturb the chorus of Argive elders, she also reveals a concern with the more normal feminine prerogatives: her home, children and her relationship to her husband. But it is this very combination of contradictory traits that makes Clytemnestra a more grotesque figure. Gagarin points out that Clytemnestra has been wronged as a woman by Agamemnon. By sacrificing Iphigenia in order to appease a goddess and to conduct a successful campaign at Troy, Agamemnon has insulted her both as a mother and a wife.[23] Until the murder of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra never greatly asserts any role but that of a loyal wife and keeper of the household. For example, her first appearance on stage is entirely traditional in that she supervises the sacrifices which are a prelude to her husband's arrival home. In her speech to the messenger (A. 604-12), she boasts of her adherence to all of the duties conventionally attributed to a good Athenian wife:[24] she will greet her husband and open the gate at his homecoming; she has guarded the house like a watchdog; she has been faithful. Although these claims are for the most part insincere, she still demonstrates a knowledge of the responsibilities traditionally expected of her. What sets Clytemnestra apart from the norm is that in carrying out these functions, she is working for her own secret purposes rather than for the advantage of the lord of the house. True to her word, she does greet her husband, but in such a way that Agamemnon is diminished in stature rather than ennobled. She causes him to exceed his proper limitations as a Greek king by walking on a carpet, an act that betrays his oriental effeminacy. The taking of such a privilege proves that Agamemnon, in her mind, is deserving of the ignominious death that she is about to inflict upon him. Similarly, she assists her husband at the lustral bath, another traditionally feminine task, but once again she turns it from a loving duty to a vengeful betrayal for the damage that Agamemnon has done to her dignity as mother and as wife.

Some critics, such as Leon Golden, consider Clytemnestra's use of Iphigenia as her reason for murdering Agamemnon a mere rationalization, a justification for her seizure of power, brought forward and mentioned only after the murder.[25] Florence Anderson argues against such a view by explaining that, although Clytemnestra makes no direct reference to her feelings about Iphigenia before Agamemnon's murder, this silence is entirely in keeping with the queen's "perfection in her role of duplicity."[26] Her speeches prior to the murder do, however, contain many references to themes of motherhood and children, which suggest that these were major factors in her decision to take vengeance.

The first words spoken by Clytemnestra in the Agamemnon contain imagery that draws out clearly the prominence of the mother-child relationship:

> εὐάγγελος μέν, ὥσπερ ἡ παροιμία,
> ἕως γένοιτο μητρὸς εὐφρόνης πάρα.
>
> (A. 264-5)
>
> (May the dawn bringing good news be born, as the proverb
> says, from its mother the night.)

The good news is, of course, the beacon's signal that Troy has fallen to the Argives. To the chorus this sign is welcome because it promises a return to normalcy when the king arrives home. For Clytemnestra, it is good news since she will soon be able to put into effect her plan for murder. The manner in which her prayer for good news connects the imagery of birth with the intimacy of the mother-child relationship shows that Agamemnon must die because he has disregarded Clytemnestra's feelings and rights as a mother. He slaughtered Iphigenia for little more than to advance his own ambitions.

Clytemnestra's inability to forget the death of her daughter is once again apparent when she is explaining to Agamemnon the reason for Orestes' absence:

> ἐκ τῶνδε τοι παῖς ἐνθάδ' οὐ παραστατεῖ,
> ἐμῶν τε καὶ σῶν κύριος πιστωμάτων
> ὡς χρῆν, Ὀρέστης·...
>
> (A. 877-9)
>
> (For these reasons indeed, the child does not stand by here, the trustee of your and my pledges, as he should have been, I mean Orestes; ...)

The name of the child is deferred until the last position in the sentence; the result is that yet another child, one who ought to be present, is brought to mind, Iphigenia. Clytemnestra also speaks of the absent child as "the trustee of your and my pledges." Denniston-Page explains this phrase: "Orestes is regarded as the holder of pledges between husband and wife, as a security for their continued affection; the interests of the son and heir protect the bond of loyalty between the parents."[27] If this is true of Orestes, then it applies equally to Iphigenia, at least in the eyes of Clytemnestra. By sacrificing Iphigenia, a female child, Agamemnon has destroyed the bond of loyalty that Iphigenia represents for Clytemnestra. Once this bond is destroyed, Clytemnestra no longer feels any obligation to honour or to protect the interests of Agamemnon; instead, she begins to plot his death. She hints at her changed purpose when she says in the same speech that her tears have now dried (A. 887). These tears would be interpreted by Agamemnon as tears of loneliness for him, although they probably refer to the tears of sorrow that mother wept for daughter. The fact that her tears have ceased implies that the time for grieving is past. Vengeance is at hand.

After the murder of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra abandons any concealment by publicly stating that the insult done to her motherhood is her reason for murder. Once again she describes the joy she experienced in the act of murder through the use of imagery of birth:

> χαίρουσαν οὐδὲν ἧσσον ἢ διοσδότῳ
> γάνει σπορητὸς κάλυκος ἐν λοχεύμασιν.
>
> (A. 1391-2)
>
> (As I rejoice in no way less than the crop does with
> Zeus-given gladness at the birth-pains of the bud.)

The figure is grotesque in itself because it contains the intermingling of two emotions normally mutually exclusive: the hideousness of violent death and the joy of giving birth to new life. Nevertheless, the image serves to connect action with motivation, that is, the murder of Agamemnon with his killing of Clytemnestra's child.

Clytemnestra continues to express her motivation through birth imagery by calling Iphigenia her φιλτάτη ὠδίς (A. 1417) "dearest birth-pain" and ἔρνος (A. 1525) "shoot" or "branch." Both figures reinforce the close physical connection between mother and child. Winnington-Ingram implies that such language conveys her sense of derogation as Agamemnon's wife and as the mother of his royal offspring:

> "In each case the phrase is completed by words
> expressive of the father's share in the child:
> 'his own child, my dearest birth-pang' (1417f.)

> 'my branch raised up by him' (1525). It has already been noted that, when, in her first speech to Agamemnon, Clytemnestra referred to the absent Orestes, she did so in terms which could apply to Iphigenia; 'wherefore there stands not by our side, as should have stood, the child, the ratification of my faith and yours.... .' Such was the value that Agamemnon placed on the pledge of their mutual love, claiming full rights of disposal in a child that was hers no less than his."[28]

The murder of Iphigenia is not the only insult experienced by Clytemnestra as a wife. It does, however, provide her with her most profound motivation for wanting Agamemnon's death. A second motive is introduced in Clytemnestra's speech of justification after the murder when she moves from the subject of Iphigenia to that of Aegisthus. She brings forward a second way in which Agamemnon has wronged her as a woman by his total disregard of her feelings and needs as a wife, by his abandonment of her for ten years and by his sexual infidelities during that period of time.

In an earlier description of her life alone in Argos Clytemnestra had spoken in general terms of the hardships endured by a wife bereft of the guidance and protection of her lord. She called it a terrible evil for a woman to sit deserted in the house apart from her man while rumours and reports of disasters in war poured in (A. 861-2). In defense of Orestes' absence, she refers to δημόθρους ἀναρχία (A.883) "the anarchy of popular clamour" breaking out. This explains the immediate danger faced by Clytemnestra when she was forced to cope with the political and social chaos caused when Agamemnon abandoned his responsibilities to go adventuring. These two reasons form the basis of her decision to join with Aegisthus:

> μὰ τὴν τέλειον τῆς ἐμῆς παιδὸς Δίκην,
> Ἄτην Ἐρινύν θ᾽ αἷσι τόνδ᾽ ἔσφαξ᾽ ἐγώ,
> οὔ μοι Φόβου μέλαθρον ἐλπὶς ἐμπατεῖ,
> ἕως ἂν αἴθῃ πῦρ ἐφ᾽ ἐστίας ἐμῆς
> Αἴγισθος, ὡς τὸ πρόσθεν εὖ φρονῶν ἐμοί.
> οὗτος γὰρ ἡμῖν ἀσπὶς οὐ σμικρὰ θράσους.
>
> (A. 1432-7)

> (By the Justice accomplished, by Ate, and Fury, for whom I slaughtered this man, the expectation of Fear does not enter my chamber while Aegisthus kindles a fire on my hearth, he who is well inclined to me as before. For this man is for us a shield of courage not small.)

This speech presents the woman's point of view in two ways. First, the reference to the vitality of a warm hearth contrasts Aegisthus, who promotes her sense of sexual identity and pride, with Agamemnon whose absence of ten years has allowed her to feel unwanted and unalive as a woman. Thus she shows that a wife has a right to the comfort of her husband's companionship. Secondly, by calling Aegisthus a shield, she refers to the protection he affords to her, her family and home simply because he is a male. Although Aegisthus has provided "the formal protection of a man and of the armed force which a man alone can command,"[29] his "womanish" behavior until the murder of Agamemnon reveals him as one easily dominated and unlikely to get in the way of Clytemnestra in the future. Indeed, she ushers him out of the presence of the hostile chorus at the end of the Agamemnon with a housewife's assurance that peace can be restored in the kingdom by a good show of front from its "master."

Clytemnestra's speech also touches upon her expectation that there is to be some regard paid to sexual fidelity by her husband. The anger aroused by Agamemnon's frivolous conduct is plainly seen in her contemptuous depiction of the dead Agamemnon as "the heart-soother of the foreign women at Troy" (A. 1438). Cassandra, too, is treated in terms more suited to a sailor's trollop than to a spear-won Trojan princess (A. 1440-3). Clytemnestra goes so far as to contrast the promiscuity of Agamemnon (A. 1438-9) with Aegisthus' faithfulness and loyalty (A. 1436-7).

In defense of women's values, Clytemnestra acts in a masculine way, seizing power, ruling, doing battle and finally killing. It has been observed by a critic that the significance of the three blows delivered in killing Agamemnon is that Clytemnestra strikes one blow as Cassandra's rival, one as Aegisthus' paramour and one as Iphigenia's mother.[30]

As a grotesque figure, Clytemnestra combines the ludicrous and the horrible. The ludicrous arises from the spectacle of a woman defying natural and social law and acting like a man. That the Greeks perceived this as an essentially comic situation is proved by the fact that Aristophanes used it to form the context for his comedy Ecclesiazusae or Women in Assembly. In this play women, who have disguised themselves as men, pack the assembly and vote to transfer political power from men to women. They use their newly-won political power to declare all money and property communal. This communism extends as well to sexual relations. Aristophanes chooses to illustrate the novel result of such a redefinition of the political spheres in a comic scene in which two old women and a young girl struggle with each other for the attentions of a young man. Their seizure of the political initiative is thus made an object of mockery and fun, and its results are shown to be comic rather than serious or destructive. In contrast, Clytemnestra's seizure and wielding of masculine authority appears to have very serious implications since she uses her power to plan and to carry out the murder of the king, her husband. If the Greeks view a woman who acts like a man as generally comic, in the case of Clytemnestra there is an additional sense of the horrible overlaid because she uses her new personality for violent and destructive ends.

The grotesque, by emphasizing Agamemnon's cold and cruel ambition and his estrangement from the Greek values he should be first to uphold, prevents him from being seen as the completely blameless victim of murder. In a similar way the grotesque alters the audience's perception of Clytemnestra as the complete villain of the trilogy. Her characterization combines her sense of the integrity of feminine values with an ability to defend herself when challenged by using the mental prowess of a man. Although she is a harsh and disturbing figure, nevertheless, the grotesque presentation of Clytemnestra allows her position to be strongly established and the advantages of it to be clearly set out. The importance to Clytemnestra of security within a well-run marriage and household represents a set of values that are ultimately more beneficial to society. Agamemnon, on the other hand, stands for a viewpoint that would compromise and even sacrifice such values in favour of winning a war supposedly fought to preserve the existence of his οἶκος. Agamemnon's adherence to the standards of a Greek way of life is severely tested; his display of oriental despotism diminishes the stability of the Greek nation and finally destroys the very οἶκος he has sworn to protect. Because Agamemnon and Clytemnestra are so different in the convictions that guide their decisions, it seems somewhat improper and contrived that, as the trilogy progresses, Clytemnestra's reasons for murder undergo a gradual reshaping, so that her appearance of being in the right begins to disappear even before the conclusion of the Agamemnon. In the Choephoroi she is little more than a licentious adulteress, whose declaration of motherly affection is subverted by the nurse's description of her own tender care of Orestes (Ch. 749-62). In the Eumenides her very status as a mother is denied by the rhetorical bombast of Apollo, who asserts that only the father is blood kin to the child (E. 640-60). If Apollo's argument is accepted, Clytemnestra's use of Iphigenia's death to justify her own act of revenge is completely discredited. But the absurdity of Apollo's claim reveals the weakness of the cause that he champions. It also helps to maintain our feeling of uneasiness at the growing development of Clytemnestra's defeat.

The downfall of Clytemnestra is especially disturbing because she is conquered by another female, Athene, whose masculine tendencies are transparent from the outset. Winnington-Ingram first notes the similarity between Clytemnestra and Athene:

> "When Orestes reached Athens, he prayed to Athena wherever she might be, whether in Libya or 'whether like a bold captain (θρασὺς ταγοῦχος ὡς ἀνήρ, 296) she surveys the plain of Phlegra.' For Athena fights like a man. In fact she was neither in Libya nor at Phlegra, but in the Troad, as she tells in her first words (397ff.), taking possession of the land which the leaders and princes of the Achaeans had given her as a prize of war. For she had fought at Troy... . She is god-goddess to Clytemnestra's man-woman; and her masculinity wins her praise and worship, while that of Clytemnestra leads to disaster for herself and others."31

In view of this similarity, Athene might well have been expected to endorse and to support Clytemnestra's position, particularly since the latter sought primarily to ensure a stronger οἶκος and, therefore, greater domestic stability. But Athene chooses not to do so, and it is her excuse that distinguishes the human woman from her divine counterpart. Clytemnestra may use masculine devices and prerogatives to defend herself, but her allegiance remains always to the world of the wife and mother. Athene's martial background is not simply an assumed role; her vote in the Eumenides in favour of Orestes' acquittal on the charge of kin-killing attests to her entirely male point of view. The goddess even suggests that her novel birth and her virginity form the basis of her decision:

> τὸ δ' ἄρσεν αἰνῶ πάντα, πλῆν γάμου τυχεῖν,
> ἅπαντι θυμῷ κάρτα δ' εἰμὶ τοῦ πατρός.
>
> (E. 737-8)
>
> (In all things I am on the side of the male, except for marriage, with all my spirit, and I am very much on the side of the father.)

One cannot but feel uncomfortable when the rightful claim of Clytemnestra's ghost for the punishment of Orestes' murder of kin is swept aside by such arbitrary considerations as these.

Notes

1. Pomeroy, Sarah B. *Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975, p. 33.

2. Doyle, R.M. "Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*: A Study in Selfishness." *CB*. 38 (1961), p. 23.

3. Tracy, H.L. "Dramatic Art in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*." *CJ* 47 (1952), p. 216.

4. Kitto, H.D.F. *Form and Meaning in Drama*. London: Methuen, 1956, p. 9.

5. Winnington-Ingram, R.P. "Clytemnestra and the Vote of Athena." *JHS*. 68 (1948), p. 132.

6. Golden, Leon. *In Praise of Prometheus: Humanism and Rationalism in Aeschylean Thought*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962, p. 64n.

7. Betensky, Aya. "Aeschylus' *Oresteia*: The Power of Clytemnestra." *Ramus*, 7 (1978), p. 13.

8. Gagarin, p. 93.

9. Denniston-Page, p. 93.

10. Verrall, p. 2.

11. Winnington-Ingram, p. 131, note 9.

12. Ibid. p. 137.

13. Ibid. p. 132.

14. Betensky, p. 19.

15. Ibid. p. 19-20.

16. ἐκπέμπων: Thuc. 6.6; ἐκδεχέσθαι: Il. 13. 710, Hdt. 4.1; παραγγέλειν: Xen. An. I. 8.3, Hdt. 7. 147, Thuc. 2.11.

17. Golden, p. 67-8.

18. Houghton, H.P. "The Klytaimnestra of the *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus." *Euphrosyne*, 1 (1957), p. 40.

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19. Apollodorus. Gods and Heroes of the Greeks: The Library of Apollodorus. Translated with an introduction and notes by Michael Simpson. Amherst: University of Michigan Press, 1976, p. 97 (II.5.10).

20. Fraenkel, Vol. 2, p. 650.

21. Rose sees this line as a reference to Clytemnestra's masculine character, that ἰσόφυχον means "of courage or spirit equal to a man's" and that γυναικῶν is a rhetorical plural. Commentary..., p. 106.

22. Winnington-Ingram, p. 131.

23. Gagarin, p. 94.

24. Thomson, George, p. 53.

25. Golden, p. 73.

26. Anderson, Florence Mary Bennett. "The Character of Clytemnestra in the Agamemnon of Aeschylus." TAPhA, 60 (1929), p. 144.

27. Denniston-Page, p. 145.

28. Winnington-Ingram, p. 135-6.

29. Ibid. p. 137.

30. Anderson, p. 143.

31. Winnington-Ingram, p. 144-5.

Chapter Six

The Death in the Bath: Orestes and the Furies

The murder of the barbarian-Greek Agamemnon by the man-woman Clytemnestra is important not only because it forms the climax of the *Agamemnon*, but because it establishes a situation that culminates in the murder of Clytemnestra in the *Choephoroi* and in the conflict between Orestes and the Old Order, represented by the Furies, in the *Eumenides*. It is significant that Aeschylus has chosen to present the murder of Agamemnon as possessing a grotesqueness of its own, one which intensifies but also goes beyond the grotesqueness of the two participants, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon. The murder is made grotesque both because Clytemnestra inappropriately applies religious imagery to define and to justify her conduct, and because of the manner in which the murder is accomplished.

The principal cause of Agamemnon's death is his sacrifice of Iphigenia at Aulis. Clytemnestra herself uses the theme of sacrifice in speaking of the murder. That she regards her act of revenge as a sort of sacrifice is first conveyed in her comment to the chorus that she has no time to tarry with Cassandra outdoors since the sheep stand ready for slaughter at the altar (A. 1055-7). Much later she speaks of her butchered husband as an animal "breathing out the swift slaughter of his blood" (A. 1389). The noun, σφάγην "slaughter," is a sacrificial term whose cognate verb, σφάζειν, refers to cutting the throat of a sacrificial victim.[1]

This application of religious vocabulary to depict the righteousness of her act becomes warped because Clytemnestra substitutes the pouring out of human blood for the normal rituals of water and wine. The first appearance of this feature occurs when she invites Cassandra inside the house to partake of "what is customary in the house" (A. 1036-1038). The ritual to which she refers is that of χέρνιβες (A. 1037), the rite of purification with holy water. The ominous context in which this ceremony is placed serves as Clytemnestra's means of suggesting that the lustral bathing of Agamemnon will provide her an opportunity to "purify" him.[2] He will become a sacrificial victim destined for slaughter. The ritual of χέρνιβες also sets the framework within which we understand Clytemnestra's reference later to the sprinkling of blood after the death blows. As she describes the wounds inflicted upon Agamemnon, she speaks of herself as struck by "the dark sprinkling of bloody dew" (A. 1390). Her confusion of the cleansing effect of sacrificial water and that of human blood is clear. The word χέρνιβες also introduces the theme of a libation poured to the dead. Although this meaning of the term is rare, it is found in this usage in a speech of Electra in the Choephoroi:

> κἀγῶ χέουσα τάσδε χέρνιβας νεκροῖς
> λέγω καλοῦσα πατέρ'· 'Εποίκτιρόν τ' ἐμέ,
> φίλον τ' 'Ορέστην...
>
> (Ch. 129-31)

> (And I, pouring these lustral waters to the dead, say
> calling upon my father: pity me and beloved Orestes...)

In this passage a libation of wine is offered by Agamemnon's daughter at his grave side. In contrast, the libation that Clytemnestra intends in the first play will be one of human blood, drained from Agamemnon's corpse in order to honour the dead Iphigenia.

The travesty that Clytemnestra has made of the ritual of pouring a libation and the connection of this rite to the figure of Iphigenia is further developed:

> παίω δέ νιν δίς· κἀν δυοῖν οἰμωγμάτοιν
> μεθῆκεν αὐτοῦ κῶλα· καὶ πεπτωκότι
> τρίτην ἐπενδίδωμι, τοῦ κατὰ χθονός,
> Ἅιδου, νεκρῶν σωτῆρος, εὐκταίαν χάριν.
>
> (A. 1384-7)

> (And I strike him, twice. And within two wails of lament,
> he let go his limbs there. And I strike him a third blow
> after he has fallen, as a thankoffering accompanied by
> prayer for Hades, the saviour of corpses under the earth.)

The three blows that fell Agamemnon contain an allusion to the custom of pouring libations after a feast shared only by men. Each drink offering specifies a divine level: the first libation is to the Olympians, the second to the Chthonians and the third to Zeus the Saviour. Clytemnestra distorts the sacredness of the third offering because, rather than invoking Zeus in his capacity as the guardian of human life, she calls upon Hades, one who can be said to save only in that he is the collector of corpses. Clytemnestra's reference to the third libation is also intended to remind us of Iphigenia who used to sing the paean that accompanied the third libation when

Agamemnon entertained guests.[3] The final way in which Clytemnestra reverses the positive associations of a libation occurs when she boasts over the body of her husband:

> εἰ δ' ἦν πρεπόντων ὥστ' ἐπισπένδειν νεκρῷ,
> τάδ'[4] ἂν δικαίως ἦν, ὑπερδίκως μὲν οὖν·
>
> (A. 1395-6)
>
> (If it were possible fittingly to pour a libation on a corpse, this would have been done justly, indeed, more than justly.)

She reshapes what should be an occasion for private and civic mourning into an occasion of joy. The pouring of a libation is more regularly a part of joyous situations, as the chorus and audience would certainly realize.[5] The grotesqueness in the abuse of religious imagery depends upon the inversion of symbols that denote life and death. Clytemnestra perverts the ceremony of purification; she substitutes life-giving water and wine and the function of Zeus for a ceremony that involves human blood and the presence of Hades, elements that bring Agamemnon death and defilement.

The death of Agamemnon is itself a grotesque deed in the manner in which it is accomplished. Agamemnon is portrayed chiefly as a military figure. Hence, it certainly befits his dignity as a leader of men to have died on the field of battle, and not at home trapped in the snares of a deceitful woman. It is also most inappropriate that the great Agamemnon, who marshalled a great military expedition and who escaped all of the perils which beset many of his allies on their return home, arrives home only to be killed in a small tub of water. The fact that his death in the bath is conceived in terms that distort the sacred and life-renewing properties of religious practice adds to the grotesqueness of his fate. In Homeric times it was customary for the women of the household to bathe the newly arrived hero. Clytemnestra reverses a rite of hospitality in order to make the welcome of her husband an opportunity for evil.[6] Agamemnon, who should have been at his safest within his own household, is actually in graver danger than when he was on the plains of battle. In all these ways the horror of Agamemnon's death is clear.

There is a comic level apparent in the murder of Agamemnon, but it is naturally less easy to discern. Aeschylus has given the murder a certain humour by allowing the character to be defeated by a device or a situation of his own making. In this Aeschylus uses the same technique used by the playwright Aristophanes in the Clouds. In this play, the protagonist, Strepsiades, enrolls his son in Socrates' Think Shop so that the youth may become adept at employing sophistic argument to save his father from having to pay his debts. Although he is reluctant at first, Pheidippides not only uses his new learning to drive off creditors, but also to justify the cruel beating of his own father. Thus Strepsiades is punished by a scheme which he himself engineered. Similarly, in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, Shylock is trapped by the strict enforcement of a bond that he himself had insisted upon.

So too is Agamemnon ensnared by a device of his own construction. Aeschylus introduces the image of a net to connect the punishment of Troy, an act made possible by the death of Iphigenia, with the death of Agamemnon, a punishment brought about by the death of Iphigenia.[7] Early in the Agamemnon the chorus uses the motif of the casting-net as their symbolic explanation for the ensnarement of Troy:

> ὦ Ζεῦ βασιλεῦ καὶ νὺξ φιλία
> μεγάλων κόσμων κτεάτειρα,
> ἥτ’ ἐπὶ Τροίας πύργοις ἔβαλες
> στεγανὸν δίκτυον, ὡς μήτε μέγαν
> μήτ’ οὖν νεαρῶν τιν’ ὑπερτελέσαι
> μέγα δουλείας
>   γάγγαμον, ἄτης παναλώτου.
>
> (A. 355-61)
>
> (Oh king Zeus and Beloved Night, possessor of great
> ornaments, who have cast on the battlements of Troy
> the covering casting-net, so that neither a great person
> nor yet anyone of the young will overleap slavery's
> great net of all-capturing ruin.)

Although it is actually Zeus and Night who cast the net, Agamemnon may be seen as its contriver both because of his close association as the instrument or extension of Zeus' determination to punish Troy and because his sacrifice of Iphigenia made the punishment of Troy possible. In addition, this vision of Zeus and Night casting the net is that of the chorus. Agamemnon, who looked upon the gods as subordinate allies, would probably have featured himself in a more central role in this action. The chorus anticipates Agamemnon's fall when they speak of a great person unable to overleap the net. Thus the victor becomes the victim of the symbolism that surrounds the success of his holy cause. Clytemnestra reinforces this symbolic connection by confessing after the murder of her husband that duplicity was her only means of constructing a trap too high for the overleaping (A. 1374-6). The deadly nature of the net is reinforced when it becomes the robe that Clytemnestra used to entangle her victim:

> ἄπειρον ἀμφίβληστρον, ὥσπερ ἰχθύων,
> περιστιχίζω, πλοῦτον εἵματος κακόν,
>
> (A. 1382-3)
>
> (The inextricable casting-net, just as one for fish, I put around, the wealth of a cloak bringing misfortune,)

The grimness of the humour that reveals a man of military stature trapped in the very symbol of the Justice he sought from Troy on Zeus' behalf, and floundering like a helpless fish in the garment of destruction, completes the grotesque nature of Agamemnon's death.

The implication of Aeschylus' use of the grotesque is to reduce the tragic impact of Agamemnon's death. This is achieved in two ways. First, there is the misapplication of religious imagery. Although both Clytemnestra and Agamemnon are guilty of manipulating sacred ceremony for their own advantage, Agamemnon seems the more blameworthy. He lured Iphigenia to Aulis by the promise of a marriage to Achilles. But in lieu of the preliminary sacrifices before the ritual of marriage, Agamemnon substitutes his daughter as a means of appeasing the wrath of Artemis, as a preliminary sacrifice to release favourable winds for his expedition to Troy.[8] The second result of the grotesque presentation is that it removes Agamemnon from an heroic context by placing him in the real world. According to Homer, Agamemnon was slain at a banquet (Od. 3. 255-75, 11. 385-439), a setting more befitting the qualities of his larger-than-life heroes. Aeschylus has Agamemnon murdered in a tub of water, a more realistic setting for a plotting wife. The grotesque presentation reduces the pity and fear that one ought normally to experience at the death of a prestigious figure such as Agamemnon. It also reinforces the impression that the repugnant nature of his character merited this sort of treatment. This in turn makes even more unacceptable and disturbing the ultimate triumph of Agamemnon's cause at the conclusion of the trilogy.

Although the grotesque is most evident as a dramatic device in the Agamemnon, it recurs in the two other plays of the trilogy, in the portrayal of Orestes through the image of a snake and in the physical appearance of the Furies.

The image of the snake is found in the Choephoroi in the dream that shows Clytemnestra's premonition of death (Ch. 526-34). In this dream, which is related by the serving women to Orestes, Clytemnestra gives birth to a snake and puts it in swaddling clothes as if it were a child. But when she gives it her breast, it sucks a mixture of milk and clotted blood. Orestes immediately recognizes the significance of the snake by asserting that he himself must become a snake in order to slay his mother (Ch. 540-50). The dream of Clytemnestra shows a distortion of the mother-child relationship in that love is replaced by cruelty.[9] Instead of giving birth to a child, which represents the continuance of life, Clytemnestra fosters a death-bringing creature. The breast, normally associated with the sustenance of life, becomes an instrument that nurtures a violent creature. By identifying himself with the snake, Orestes becomes a grotesque figure. It is both ludicrous and horrible to imagine a traditional hero voluntarily associating the nobility of his cause with the perverted image of an offspring that sucks out the life blood of its genetrix.

The effect of this grotesque symbolism is to cause the audience to evaluate even more carefully the motivations of Orestes. He carries out his task of murder by using deceit; he sends a false message of his own death while disguised as a traveller lately arrived at the household (Ch. 674-87).[10] Orestes gives two reasons for his determination to kill his mother: first, because he has been deprived of his patrimony; second, because he has been commanded to do so by Apollo, who threatens him with a hideous death accompanied by ulcers and leprous fur should he fail to avenge Agamemnon's death (Ch. 276-82). Hence the deed is unheroic and unworthy, both in the means chosen for its execution and in the pragmatic motives that drive Orestes, those of greed and fear. Even the identification of Orestes with the snake is appropriate. It removes the son completely from sharing in any vestige of the nobility given to his father, Agamemnon, in the latter's characterization as the eagle of Zeus. Orestes has little to recommend him as a tragic or heroic figure. As heir to the masculine concerns of civic and domestic duty, the concerns that led Agamemnon to view himself and his decision as supreme, Orestes fails to ennoble the cause of his father. Indeed, the comparison of him to a death-bringing snake does much to demean further his cause and to make it appear unworthy of triumph.

The Furies in their appearance come closest to a visible demonstration of the concept of the grotesque in that their form, though recognizable as human, involves a distortion of the human figure.[11] In the Choephoroi they are described by Orestes as being Γοργόνων δίκην (Ch. 1048) "like Gorgons:" φαιοχίτωνες καὶ πεπλεκτανημέναι/ πυκνοῖς δράκουσιν (Ch. 1049-50) "dark-robed and entwined with thick-swarming snakes;" and κάξ ὀμμάτων στάζουσιν αἷμα δυσφιλές (Ch. 1058) "and from their eyes they drip hateful blood." In the Eumenides the reaction of Apollo's priestess to the horrible admixture in the Furies of human and non-human elements is indicative of the shocking effect such creatures must have produced upon the audience. The difficulty she has in describing them reflects the fear and loathing they inspire in others. At first, they appear to her to be like women, but then the priestess decides that they are really Gorgons, and finally she concludes that they resemble Harpies. Their delineation is completed by references to the Furies as wingless, dark with foul breath, with ooze dripping from their eyes, and dressed in garments not suitable to wear in the presence of any god's statues (E. 47-54). Apollo himself refers to them as κατάπτυστοι κόραι (E. 68) "these despicable maidens" and, using a grotesque oxymoron, as γραῖαι παλαιαὶ παῖδες (E. 69) "withered, ancient children."[12] It is clearly not simply the sub-human attributes of the Furies, but the presence of such features in visibly human form that makes them grotesque in appearance and thus ludicrous and horrifying.

Since the Furies are the easiest creatures to identify as grotesque, reaction to them would be most extreme.[13] Yet, while their appearance is profoundly disturbing, the moral value they represent is unequivocal and unencumbered by any ulterior motive: they proclaim the traditional belief in the need for crimes of kin-murder to be avenged (E. 355-8); they insist that any city which can acquit the agent of such a crime is polluted and doomed to disaster (E. 490-8). They are the rigid upholders of an unchanging moral view. They alone have an unequivocal voice in the trilogy.[14] One might expect, therefore, that as proponents of a traditional αἰδώς (that is, the sense of fear and shame that derives from one's inner moral authority and which compels one to respect custom and law[15]), the Furies ought to win their case. But this does not happen. Although they are given by Athene a place in the new system of justice, the fact that Orestes is acquitted for a crime no different in its nature than that committed by his mother and father, shows that the Furies have lost. The Old Order no longer exists any more than do the Furies once they have been "persuaded" by Athene to walk to a new residence of honour beneath the Acropolis of Athens. Their title, "Lovely Maidens" bespeaks a completely refurbished identity; as Furies they have been symbolically destroyed. The torchlight procession which leads these Eumenides to their new home is similar in its dramatic display and impact to the scene in which Agamemnon walks on lavish tapestries. In both scenes the principals walk a path to destruction.

Aeschylus deliberately concludes the trilogy on a moral dilemma. There seems to be no equitable standard of right and wrong. The audience is pulled in two different directions. There is pleasure at seeing the House of Atreus rid of its continual cycle of bloodletting. This relief, however, is balanced by the sensation of horror in the audience at the capricious way in which Athene manipulates the judicial meaning of the tied vote. It is the Furies who best convey the ambivalent feelings experienced by the audience. Although these ladies are grotesque in appearance, they are the champions of an old-fashioned standard of justice, one which transcends considerations of the moment. Athene, on the other hand, makes her pronouncement in favour of Orestes solely on the basis of her pride in her own masculine heritage. The audience is finally compelled to make a choice between that which is grotesque in form and that which is grotesque in deed.

Notes

1. Lebeck, Anne. *The Oresteia: A Study in Language and Structure*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971, p. 63.

2. Zeitlin, F.I. "The Motif of the Corrupted Sacrifice in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*." *TAPhA*, 96 (1965) p. 467.

3. Ibid. p. 473.

4. Here read τάδ' in place of Murray's τῷδ'.

5. Fraenkel, Vol. 3, p. 659.

6. Duke, T.T. "Murder in the Bath: Reflections on the Death of Agamemnon." *CJ*, 49 (1953-4), p. 326.

7. Lebeck, p. 64.

8. Zeitlin, p. 466.

9. Whallon, W. "The Serpent at the Breast." *TAPhA*, 89 (1958), p. 271.

10. Clytemnestra, who slew by deceit, is pictured by Cassandra in the *Agamemnon* as being a snake (A. 1223). Thus by using the same identification, Orestes, in fact, shows himself to be no better than the one whose actions he condemns.

11. Jennings, p. 9.

12. Maxwell-Stuart, P.G. "The Appearance of Aeschylus' Erinyes." *G&R*, 20 (1973), p. 81.

13. Tradition has it that the sight of them on the stage caused women to scream and faint or give birth prematurely.

14. Vellacott, Phillip, "Has Good Prevailed? A Further Study of the Oresteia." *TAPhA*, 108 (1978), p. 117.

15. Vellacott, p. 115-6. He defines αἰδώς as the capacity for horror which derives from the inner sense of moral authority possessed by each mortal.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

Aeschylus was considered by the ancients to be an expert in the genre of the satyr-play. Since a primary feature of this genre is its play with distortions of both a physical and thematic nature, it is not surprising that the grotesque as a device may also be found in his tragedies.

In satyr-plays grotesqueness in form is most evident in the beast choruses. These creatures were part-man and part-horse, sometimes part-man part-goat. Their appearance and behavior on stage set the tone of the satyr-play. The chorus wore grotesque masks and loincloths to which were attached a tail and an erect phallus; they are reputed to have acted in a crude and unrestrained manner.[1] In spite of such crudity, the satyr-choruses combined a sense of humanity with their animal form. They often possessed secrets that were valuable to men, secrets such as how to make gold, to rear cattle and to concoct cures.[2] The clash between their hideous physical shape and the benefits which their skills could bestow upon man was what made the choruses truly grotesque.

The satyr-play is also grotesque in its distortion of theme. The play was tragic in structure, because it had a prologue, parados, several episodes, each of which was followed by a choral song, and

and an exodos. The satyr-play was like a tragedy in that its subject matter was usually derived from myth. The feature that made the satyr-play grotesque was its treatment of myth through a burlesque or parody of its context.[3] For example, in Aeschylus' satyr-play Diktyoulkoi or The Net Haulers, a chorus of satyrs helps fishermen to land the chest that encloses Danae and her infant son, Perseus. Although the play is not complete, in the part preserved Silenus, the leader of the satyrs, seeks a marriage with Danae. The lady for her part is much distressed over the prospect of marriage with a creature who is half-man half-horse. This play concluded a trilogy on the Perseus theme and thus treated in a crude and humourous manner characters who in the trilogy had been the subject of serious comment. Aeschylus' use of the device of the grotesque in the Oresteia makes him the forerunner of Euripides, who combined the elements of tragedy and satyr-play together in the Alcestis.

Aeschylus incorporates the grotesque, a device expected in the satyr-play, into the construction of the Oresteia for a purpose that is two-fold. First, it allows him to transform heroic figures of myth into more recognizable human beings whose actions on stage strike the audience as realistic. Second, the grotesque helps to approximate more closely the complexity of the problems faced by the characters. As a dramatic device that plays upon the audience's emotional reaction to distortions of truth and beauty it serves to undercut satisfaction with the resolution of the trilogy.

In the Oresteia Aeschylus examines the conflict between tribal custom and the establishment of a new social order. Although he uses mythological figures to represent this conflict, he is nevertheless treating an event which was a contemporary issue in Athens, the founding of a court on the Areopagus to try cases of homicide and to eliminate family vendettas. Aeschylus uses the grotesque because it is rooted in the real world rather than in the fantastic. In the fantastic world any appearance or action is possible; therefore, any clash of things which are incompatible loses its effect.[4] The grotesque is part of the real world because its power and effect derive from the distortion of the norms that people experience in their everyday life. Thus by using the grotesque in his portrayal of the sacrifice of Iphigenia, the characters of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, the murder in the bath, Orestes and the Furies, Aeschylus forces the audience to explore the reasons why these characters or events appear perversions of what the audience should normally expect. The solution of the problem of homicide resides in the real world, not in the heroic background in which these murders are set.

The trilogy ends with the acquittal of Orestes for a crime which in appearance is no different from those committed by his mother and father. The grotesque is especially visible in the trial. Here physically deformed goddesses of an Old Order are pitted against Apollo and Athene, who are spokesmen for a new and revolutionary social and religious outlook. When Orestes is freed, so too is Agamemnon vindicated. Although their cause is triumphant, their grotesque portrayal shows that the father was motivated by insolence and ambition, and the son by fear and expectations of personal advantage. In victory Agamemnon and Orestes appear to have fared better than they merit. In contrast, Clytemnestra and the Furies seem to have fared worse. The grotesque portrayal of both queen and divinities reveals that Clytemnestra promotes a set of personal values that are ultimately more beneficial to society than those of Agamemnon, and that the Furies stand for a set of religious values which, until then, had never been a matter of debate. In spite of the worth of their causes, Clytemnestra and the Furies are defeated. Hence, there is dissatisfaction with the conclusion of the trilogy, one that arises out of the inequitable way in which the male wins over the female. Because of Clytemnestra's femininity, little attention is paid to the justice of the claims of her ghost. Similarly, it is the masculine Athene, daughter of Zeus and patroness of Athens, who persuades these older female divinities to become "prosecutors" in a unique trial, one which hinges grotesquely on whether or not they as the Old Order ought to exist anymore (E. 360-5).[5]

The Oresteia consists of a succession of claims and counterclaims that are put forth by each character to justify his own individual and distorted sense of justice and morality. The citizens, who have been selected as jurors by Athene because of their age and high social status, cast a tied vote, unable to decide an issue which will define the future direction of Athenian society. The goddess is therefore compelled to intervene. Her rationale for favouring Orestes has nothing to do with the validity of any of the claims of members of the House of Atreus or, indeed, even with the prerogatives of other divine beings. Her birthright has depended upon only the male, Zeus; her powers stem from Zeus and as such, though a female, she is the defender of Athens; her decision to stand on the side of the defendant, when the vote is tied, is an affirmation on her part of the privileged status of the male.

> "The goddess makes no mention of right or wrong, of the needs of a healthy society. She betrays the deterrent principle she has so solemnly enjoined on the court. Her decision recognizes neither justice nor mercy; it divides the human race into two halves, and pronounces justice inapplicable to the weaker half. In judging which of the crimes was the more heinous, she allows the plea of provocation to the one side while denying it to the other, and considers not intention, not penitence, not consanguinity, but the sex of the victim. Her 'principle' moves from the inadequacy of justice not towards an idea of goodness, but towards the interest of a social structure founded on power. The decision is thus not more than just but less than just. Athene answers anguish with convention, seriousness with complacency, the universal with the incidental, the profound with the expedient."[6]

Aeschylus allows the trilogy to end on this unsatisfactory and disquieting note in order to show that human life is perhaps always a clash of incompatibles and unharmonious elements. The use of the grotesque throughout the three plays not only prepares the audience for the ambivalent emotions which they experience at the conclusion, but it also creates within the viewer the capacity to perceive the distorted and problematic nature of human existence. The grotesque is also the means by which Aeschylus suggests his own unhappiness with the progress assumed by his contemporary Athenians to have been made in the establishment of the court on the Areopagus. The "solution" arrived at by Athene is too arbitrary and simplistic to resolve our doubts about several of the homicides in the trilogy. The murders of Cassandra and Aegisthus are never addressed, unless we are to conclude that paramours whether voluntary or not deserve to die because of their sexual involvement. It is significant that Clytemnestra and Agamemnon both act in a sexually irresponsible manner; but their murders receive due public consideration because of the prominence of these royal figures in the house of Atreus. Yet by the end of the trilogy even homicide appears to require a specialized definition. It is only the killing of males that is condemned. Both Agamemnon and Orestes are acquitted of homicides that involve, traditionally, the most heinous sort of crime, that of kin-killing. The trial of Orestes is not only the precedent that establishes the Areopagus as a court of law for homicide, but it is also the symbolic precedent that supports the supremacy of masculine rights. The grotesque is the chief literary device used by Aeschylus that creates and sustains our awareness that problems as complex as these cannot ever be answered as easily as they seem to have been in the *Eumenides*.

Notes

1. Baldry, H.C. Greek Literature for the Modern Reader. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951, p. 140-1.

2. Seaford, Richard. "On the Origins of Satyric Drama." Maia, 27 (1975), p. 213.

3. Adrados, Francisco R. Festival, Comedy and Tragedy. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1975, p. 312.

4. Thomson, Philip. The Grotesque, p. 23.

5. Although the text of lines 360-5 is in a corrupt state, it may be seen from them that the Furies feel that they are out of favour with Zeus. "But Zeus banished from the council-halls this blood-dripping, hateful company." (E. 364-5)

6. Vellacott, p. 120.

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